

Male Students Remain Underrepresented in Australian Universities. Should Australia be concerned?

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Summary:

Females accounted for 58 percent of all domestic students enrolled in Australia Universities in 2016. The ratio is 100 females to only 72 males. This proportion is above the Australian demographic distribution where 49.5 percent of females are in the age group 15 to 39 years and 55 percent are in the age range 15 to 59 years. The proportion of female postgraduates is higher than for undergraduates, accentuating the imbalance. Of the 42 universities in Australia 35 have more female than male students with two having more than 70% females. The gender gap is a worldwide phenomenon with the OECD reporting that women now account for 56 percent of students enrolled in higher education. Some countries are highlighting the trend as a society challenge.

There are more domestic undergraduate female students than males in 7 of designated 10 fields of education. The concentration is in three fields, society and culture, health, management and commerce. Males are dominant in only two fields, information technology, engineering and related technologies at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is the norm globally. The longer-term consequences for Australian society of this imbalance are serious, but rarely discussed.

By contrast, there are fewer overseas female enrollees (48.3%) than males. Of ten fields of education, management and commerce courses are the most popular for both females and males at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Interestingly, despite their lower numbers undergraduate females represent a higher proportion of enrollees in seven fields of education. The gender distribution from various nationalities strongly reflect cultural differences. At one extreme 68% of students from the Philippines are female, while only 10% of students from Pakistan are female. Of the 24 nationalities that had more than 2000 higher education students studying in Australia in 2016, the majority (13) had more females than males.

The male participation gender imbalance has consequences for Australian society, including cultural and wealth distribution changes. While celebrating strong female participation further proactive strategies are required to encourage more males to complete year 12 studies and attend universities.

1. Introduction

The Australian population recently past 25 million according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (1). Australian higher education has enjoyed significant benefits in recent years because of the population growth and the strength of international student enrolments (2). One component of the higher education student profile that is rarely discussed is the male and female enrolment imbalance relative to the population demographics and the distribution by

course and broad field of education. For the present analysis the year 2016 is the main reference because the most recent complete primary data sets relate to that year.

In 2016 93% of domestic undergraduates were aged 39 or less compared with 70% of domestic postgraduates. Some 99.4% of domestic undergraduates were aged less than 60 years, while 95.4% of domestic postgraduates were in this age range (3). In considering the participation of Australians in higher education studies it is appropriate to benchmark performance against these two age ranges.

In 2016 some 34.7 % of the population were in the range 15 to 39. This percentage increased to 60.3% for the age range 15 to 59. Slightly less than half the population in the first age range was female (49.7%), but this increased to 55.1% when the expanded age range was considered (4). The former range was chosen to be most appropriate for evaluating the gender participation in undergraduate studies, while the latter range was appropriate for evaluating postgraduate student participation.

2. Domestic Student Gender Profiles

2.1 Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies.

The primary source of domestic and overseas student 2016 data used for the present analyses has been obtained from the Department of Education and Training website using the uCube dataset facility (5). The domestic student data sourced by gender, field of education and broad level of course is presented in Appendix A. No gender information was available for 409 of the 1,065,709 students. Course and field of education information relating to these students are not provided in the tables. Their numbers are included in the total enrolment figures.

The enrolments by postgraduate and undergraduate course level are shown in table 1. Overall, there are 169,926 more domestic female students enrolled than male students. Some 40,792 students are postgraduate and 123,376 undergraduate. Hence 58% of all domestic enrollees are female compared with 55.1% of the Australian population being in the recruitment target range from age 15 to 59. In Victorian schools in 2017 51.6% of year 12 students were female (6). In general, female participation in university studies exceed their representation in year 12 studies.

Table 1. Domestic Enrolments by Gender: 2016 Data

Course Level	Male	Female	Total	%Female
Postgraduate	101,271	142,063	243,334	58.4%
Undergraduate	332,638	456,014	788,652	57.8%
Total (All Courses)	447,687	617,613	1,065,709	58.0%

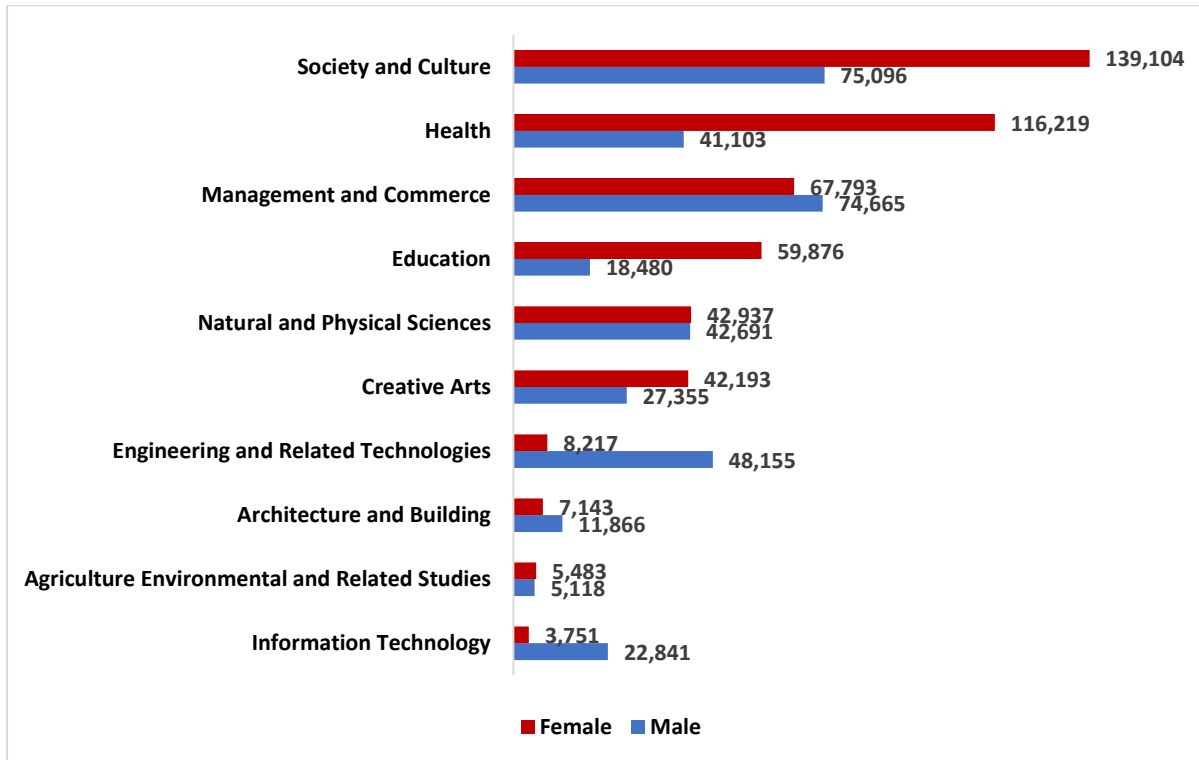
If the enrolment pattern was to strictly follow the population gender distribution for ages 15 to 59 then males are underrepresented in the 2016 cohort by 30,816. The underrepresentation at the postgraduate level, using the same population age range, would be 7,986, while at the undergraduate level the shortfall would be 21,467, If undergraduate enrolments are referenced to the age range 15 to 39 (50.3% male), then the male participation shortfall would be much higher at 64,054 students.

2.2 Domestic Students Fields of Education

2.2.1 Undergraduate Enrolments

The number of domestic male and female enrolments by field of education and broad course is shown in Appendix A. The undergraduate information is shown graphically in figure 1. The fields are ranked according to the number of enrolled female students.

Figure 1 Number of Male and Female Domestic Undergraduates by Field of Education in 2016 ranked by Female enrolments

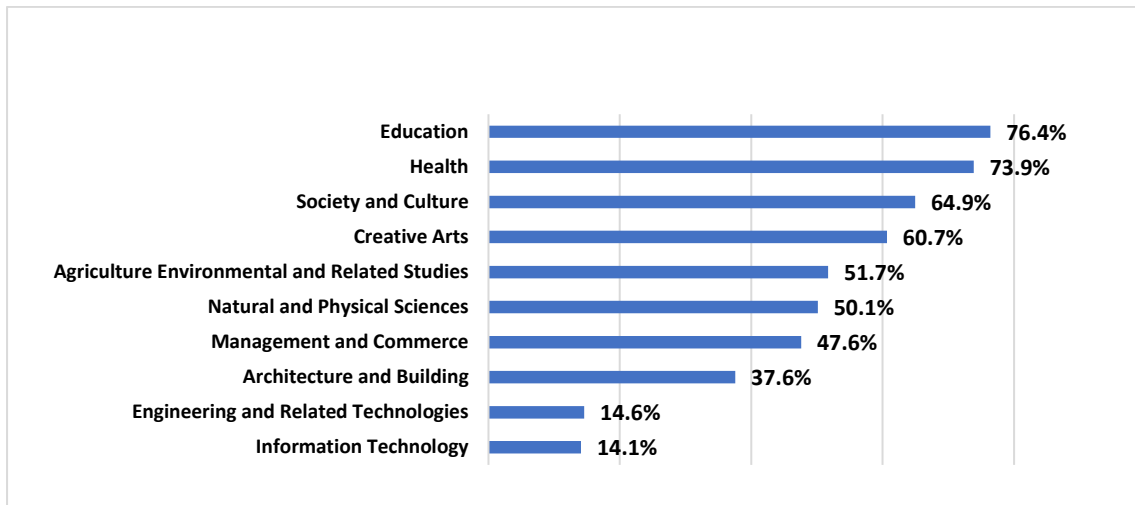


The three most popular undergraduate fields for females are society and culture (30.5% of the distribution, Appendix D), health (25.5%) and management and commerce (14.9%). Some 71% of females are enrolled in these three fields in 2016. For males, society and culture (22.6%), management and commerce (22.4%), engineering and related technologies (14.5%) are the three most popular fields. Some 60% of male undergraduates are enrolled in one of these three fields.

The percentage of females in each field of education is presented in Appendix C and figure 2. It is striking that in seven of the eleven fields of education there are more domestic female undergraduate students than male students. The wide variations among the fields of education range from less than 15% females in information technology and engineering to more than 75% in education and food hospitality. Overall, it is evident that males are dominant in three fields, females in five fields with a reasonable gender balance in only three field.

There has been considerable attention given to the low participation of females in school science and mathematics subjects resulting in low higher education enrolments in engineering and information technology courses. The same level of concern has not been expressed about low participation of males in fields such as education and health services.

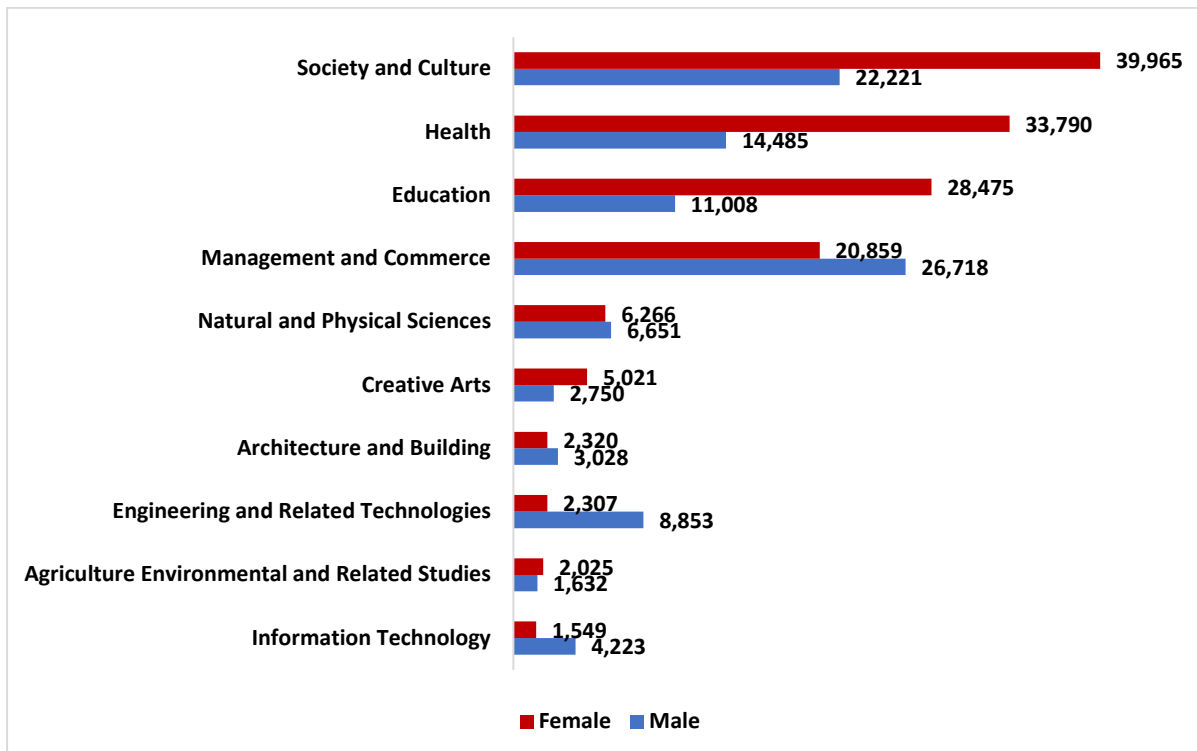
Figure 2. Percentage Female Domestic Undergraduate Enrolments by Field of Education: 2016 Data



2.2.2 Postgraduate Enrolments

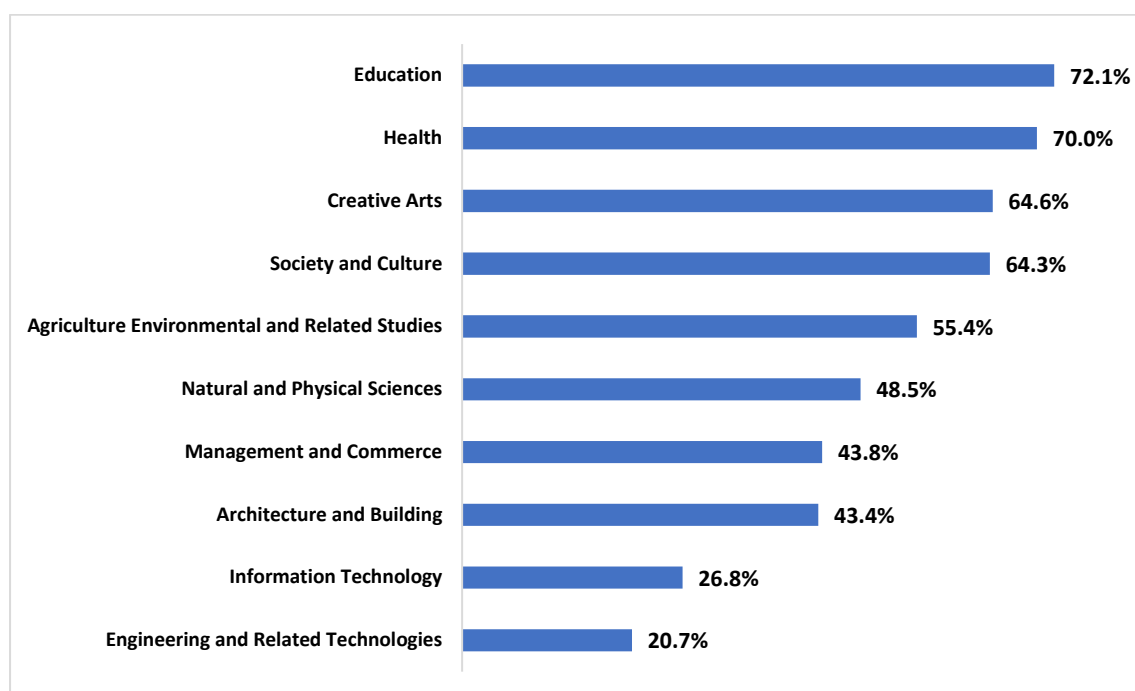
The number of domestic male and female postgraduates are given in Appendix A. The distribution is shown graphically in figure 3. For females the three most popular field are society and culture (28.1% of distribution, Appendix D), Health (23.8%) and education (20%). Hence, some 72% of females are enrolled in one of these three fields. For males the most popular fields are management and commerce (26.4%), society and culture (21.9%) and health (14.3%). The majority of male postgraduates (63%) are enrolled in one of these three fields.

Figure 3 Number of Male and Female Domestic Postgraduates by Field of Education in 2016 ranked by female enrolments.



The percentage of females in each field of education is presented in Appendix C and figure 4. Now there is more of a balance with five of the ten fields of education having more domestic female postgraduate students than male students. The variations among the fields of education are large, ranging from 21% females in engineering and related technologies to 70% or more in health and education. Males are again dominant in only two fields; engineering and information technology. There is an increased female proportional representation at the postgraduate level in five fields relative to the undergraduate representation (Figures 2 and 4 and Appendix C). The fields are Information Technology, Engineering, Architecture and Building, Agriculture and Environment and Creative Arts.

Figure 4. Percentage Female Domestic Postgraduate Enrolments by Field of Education: 2016 Data



3 Overseas Student Gender Profiles

3.1 Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies

The male and female overseas enrolment data for 2016 are presented in table 2 and Appendix B. In contrast to the domestic profile where 58% of enrolled students were female only 48.3% of overseas students were female. Proportionally there are fewer females in postgraduate courses than in undergraduate courses (46.9% vs 48.6%). Overseas students represent 27% of all enrolments, being 31% of all male enrollees and 23% of all female enrollees. By broad course level overseas students are 39.5% of all postgraduates and 21.7% of all undergraduates.

Table 2. Overseas Enrolments by Gender: 2016 Data

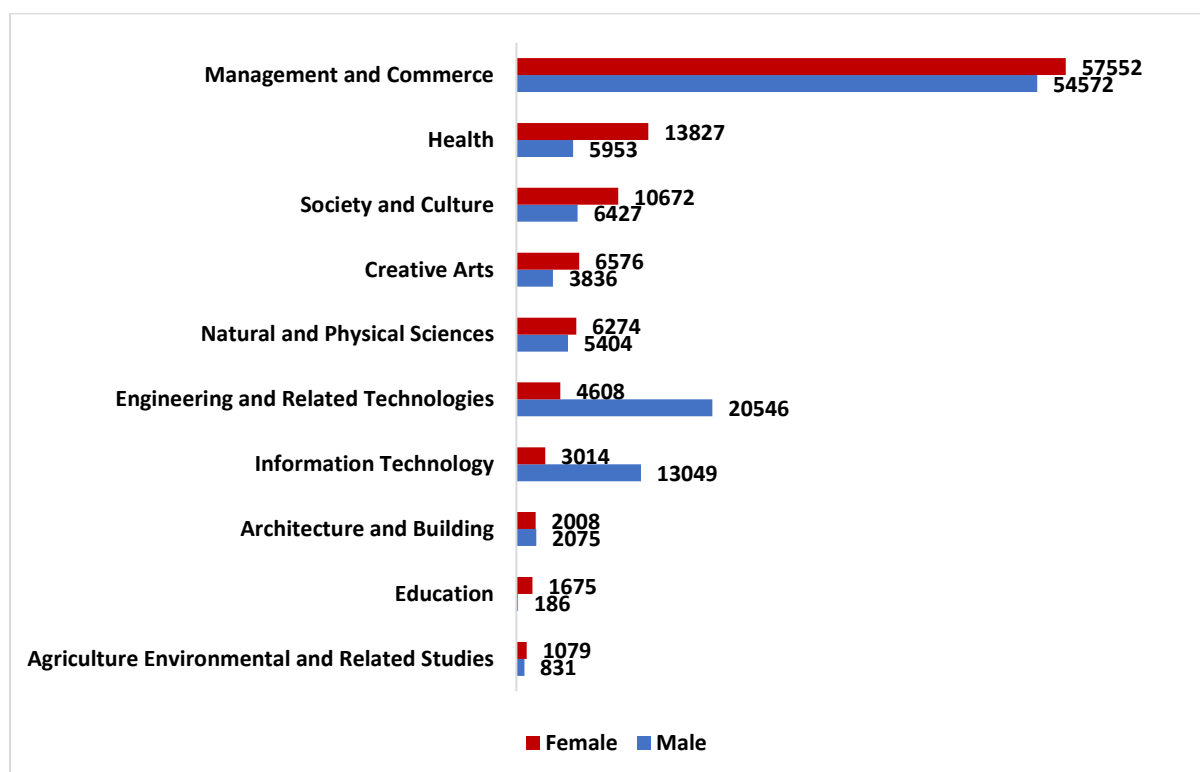
Course Level	Male	Female	Total	%Female
Postgraduate	84,493	74,483	158,976	46.9%
Undergraduate	111,910	106,021	217,931	48.6%
Total (All Courses)	202,411	189,068	391,500	48.3%

3.2 Overseas Students Fields of Education

3.2.1 Undergraduate Enrolments

The number of overseas male and female enrolments by field of education and broad course is shown in Appendix B. The undergraduate information is shown graphically in figure 5. The fields are ranked according to the number of enrolled female students.

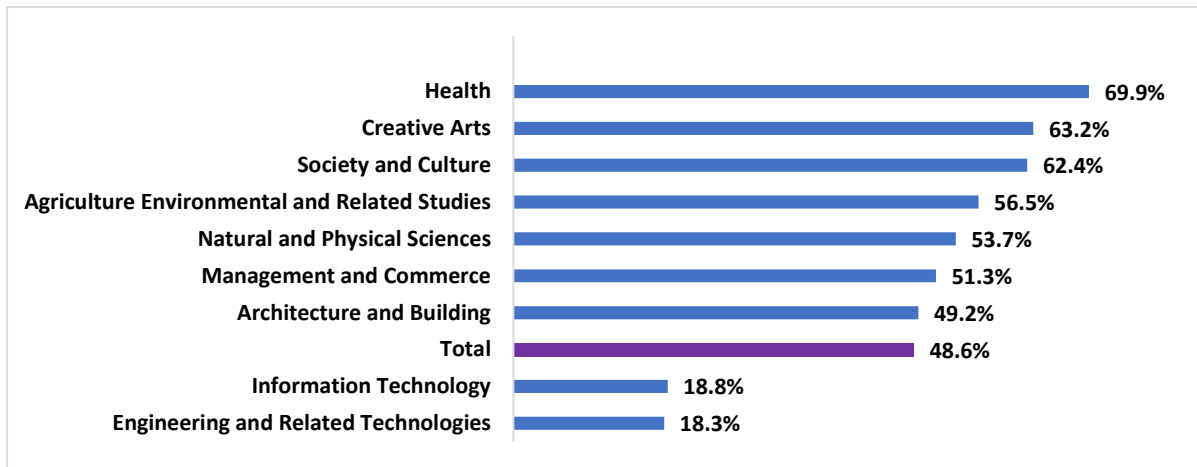
Figure 5 Number of Male and Female Overseas Undergraduates by Field of Education in 2016 ranked by Female enrolments



The popularity of management and commerce courses is very evident with 48.8% of overseas male undergraduates selecting this field and 54.3% of females (Appendix D). For females the second most popular field is health (13%) then society and culture (10.1%). For males engineering (18.4%) and information technology (11.5%) were the next most popular courses. The least popular courses for both genders are architecture and building, education and agriculture.

The percentage of females in each field of education is presented in Appendix C and figure 6. As for the domestic cohort (see figure 2), in seven of the ten fields of education there are more overseas female undergraduate students than male students even though overall there are more males enrolled. The wide variations among the fields of education range from less than 20% females in information technology and engineering to more than 90% in education. There are parallels with the domestic profile. Overall, males are dominant in only two fields, females in five fields with a reasonable gender balance in four field.

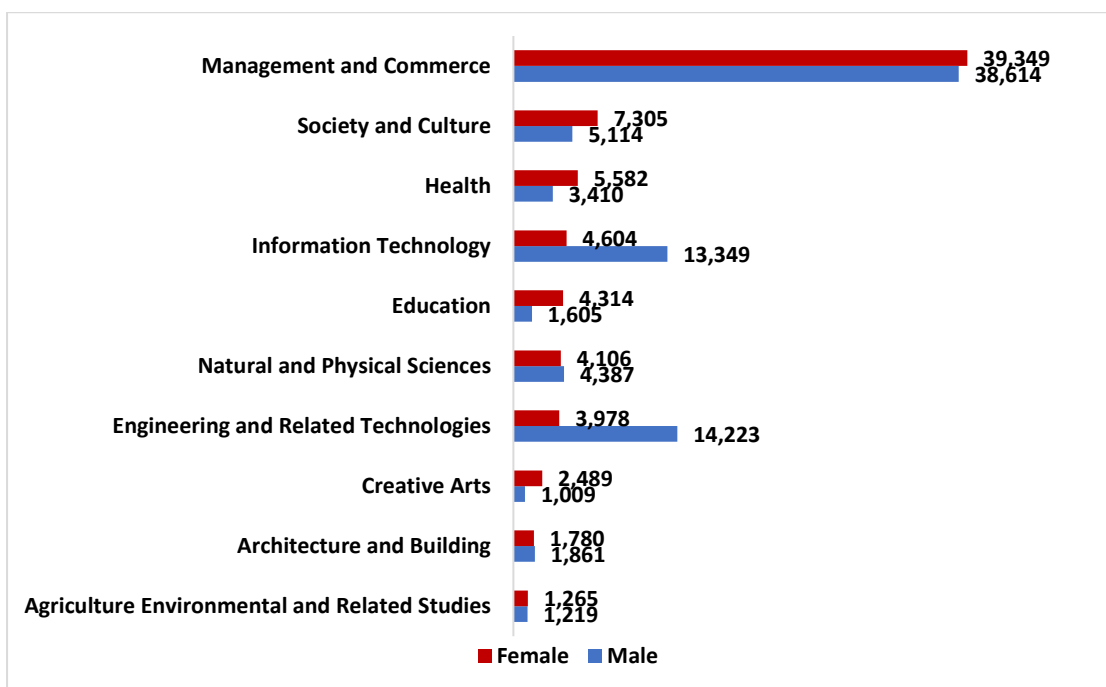
Figure 6. Percentage Overseas Female Undergraduate Enrolments by Field of Education: 2016 Data



3.2.2 Postgraduate Enrolments

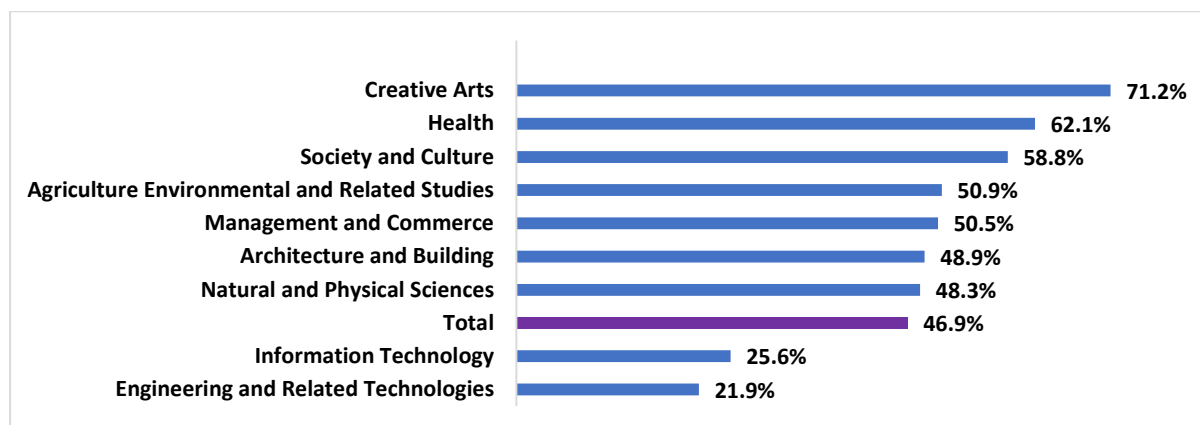
The number of overseas male and female postgraduates are given in Appendix B. The distribution is shown graphically in figure 7. Management and commerce courses are clearly the most popular for both male (45.37%) and female (52.8%) enrollees. The distribution of female students among the other courses is relatively uniform with no course having more the 10% of the female cohort enrolled. By contrast overseas male students are also concentrated in postgraduate engineering courses (16.8%) and information technology courses (15.8%). This pattern is very different to the domestic postgraduate profile (figure 3) where there is a more even distribution.

Figure 7 Number of Male and Female Overseas Postgraduates by Field of Education in 2016 ranked by female enrolments.



The percentage of females in each field of education is presented in Appendix C and figure 8. There are more overseas female postgraduate students than male students in seven of the ten fields of education. With the exception of engineering and information technology females are proportionally well represented in all other fields. There is an increased female proportional representation at the postgraduate level in four fields relative to the undergraduate profile (Figures 6 and 8 and Appendix C). These fields are Information Technology, Engineering, Creative Arts and Food Hospitality.

Figure 8. Percentage Overseas Female Postgraduate Enrolments by Field of Education: 2016 Data



4 Overseas Students Country Distribution by Gender.

Data are available for all overseas students by country of birth and gender (7). The growth and diversity of overseas students at Australian universities has been discussed in a previous article (8). In 2016 there were 24 nations that had more than two thousand students studying in Australian higher education institutions. This information is presented in table 3. For 13 of these nationalities more females are studying in Australia than males. The variations are very large between regions reflecting social and cultural behaviour. Males dominate the profile of students from the Middle East and South Asia with, for example, 90% of Pakistani and 78% of Saudi students being male. By contrast the majority of students from the South East Asia region are female. Philippines is the stand out with 68.1% of its students being female.

Table 3 Gender Distribution for Nationalities with more than 2000 students in Australian Universities in 2016 ranked by percent females.

Nationality of Birth 2016	Gender		TOTAL	%
	Males	Females		Females
Pakistan	7,757	862	8,619	10.0%
Saudi Arabia	3,517	971	4,488	21.6%
Bangladesh	3,566	1,234	4,800	25.7%
India	27,878	13,669	41,547	32.9%
Sri Lanka	4,503	2,854	7,357	38.8%
Nepal	8,234	5,530	13,764	40.2%
Iran	1,304	1,033	2,337	44.2%

Hong Kong	6,462	5,221	11,683	44.7%
Korea, Republic of (South)	2,884	2,661	5,545	48.0%
Indonesia	5,908	5,834	11,742	49.7%
Brazil	1,104	1,098	2,202	49.9%
Malaysia	14,761	15,234	29,995	50.8%
Mauritius	1,145	1,236	2,381	51.9%
Germany	1,278	1,404	2,682	52.3%
Japan	1,017	1,134	2,151	52.7%
Canada	1,351	1,565	2,916	53.7%
Singapore	11,492	13,792	25,284	54.5%
China	55,407	67,996	123,403	55.1%
Viet Nam	8,702	10,784	19,486	55.3%
South Africa	1,023	1,278	2,301	55.5%
Thailand	1,103	1,497	2,600	57.6%
Taiwan	1,049	1,454	2,503	58.1%
United States of America	2,549	4,177	6,726	62.1%
Philippines	1,438	3,064	4,502	68.1%
Total 24 Countries	175,432	165,582	341,014	48.6%

5. Gender Mix in Australian Universities

Information on the enrolment of students in Australian universities is available from the Department of Education and Training, however the gender statistics on numbers are not separated between domestic and overseas students (9). Some 55.4% of all enrolled students are female. Four universities, Australian Catholic University (71.7%). Notre Dame (71.6%), New England (66.0%) and Charles Darwin (65.3%) have more than 65 percent female students. Only seven of the forty-two universities report having more male students than female students. They are Wollongong (49.8%), Western Australia (49.4%), UTS (49.2%), Adelaide (48.8%), Divinity (\$8.3), RMIT (47.9%) and UNSW (46.5%). Twenty three universities are above the 55.4% average with nineteen below.

6. Policy Considerations

The growing gender gap in participation by males in education has been highlighted by the OECD as a global issue in a 2015 international skills assessment report entitled *The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence* (10). Some 56% of higher education enrollees in OECD countries are female. Australia with 58% female enrolments is above the global average. It was highlighted in the OECD report that globally males are likely to be less engaged in school, have lower skills, poorer academic achievement and lower career aspirations than females. The trend in Asian countries is for increasing participation by females raising demographic and cultural concerns for society. For example, in Malaysian universities females represent 64% of all enrollees while in Thai universities the proportion is near 60% (11). Will this be the case in Australia in the future? Andrew Norton of the Grattan Institute has highlighted this matter in 2015 (12). At the University of Melbourne in the 1970s less than 40% of enrolled students were female. In 2016 the percentage was 56%, representing a substantial change in the demographics.

There has been much commentary in Australia recently about the underrepresentation of females in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (13). Initiatives by the Australian Government in this area are to be welcomed; however, the broader issues of male gender imbalance and the dominance of females in most fields of education are not receiving sufficient attention. Are there national strategic implications arising from the gender gap? The underachievement by males in schools needs attention before we can expect any significant increase in male participation in universities.

The other main sector for tertiary training is the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. As discussed in an earlier article (2) this sector had an estimated 4.2 million enrolled students in 2017, almost three times the numbers enrolled in higher education. The student profile is indeed very different. Most of the students are domestic, 96%, with 89% being part time and 47% being female (14).

University staffing profiles have been a matter of policy discussion for many years (15). For several decades universities have employed more females than males with the predominance being in non-academic roles. Female participation in academic positions has steadily improved through affirmative action policies. Some 45% of academics were female in 2016, compared with 41% a decade earlier in 2007 (16). The major improvement has been at senior levels with 38% of senior lecturers and above being females in 2016 compared with 31% in 2007. The increase is providing more role models for female students. Overall, in 2016 57% of university staff were female compared with 54% in 2007. Females predominate in non-academic roles increasing from 64% in 2007 to 66% in 2016.

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Appendix A Domestic Students by Gender, Broad Course and Field of Education: 2016 Enrolments

2016 Enrolment Data		Natural and Physical Sciences	Information Technology	Engineering and Related Technologies	Architecture and Building	Agriculture Environment al and Related	Health	Education	Management and Commerce	Society and Culture	Creative Arts	Food Hospitality and Personal Services	Mixed Field Programs	Non-Award course	Total
Male	Postgraduate	6,651	4,223	8,853	3,028	1,632	14,485	11,008	26,718	22,221	2,750				101,271
	Undergraduate	42,691	22,841	48,155	11,866	5,118	41,103	18,480	74,665	75,096	27,355	11			332,638
	Enabling	334	6	85	8	2	108	894	27	2,774	1,293	1,415	4,180		11,126
	Non-Award													2,652	2,652
	Total	49,676	27,070	57,093	14,902	6,752	55,696	30,382	101,410	100,091	31,398	1,426	4,180	2,652	447,687
Female	Postgraduate	6,266	1,549	2,307	2,320	2,025	33,790	28,475	20,859	39,965	5,021				142,063
	Undergraduate	42,937	3,751	8,217	7,143	5,483	116,219	59,876	67,793	139,104	42,193	40			456,014
	Enabling	151		92	4	4	413	1,834	21	3,574	1,328	896	7,010		15,327
	Non-Award													4,209	4,209
	Total	49,354	5,300	10,616	9,467	7,512	150,422	90,185	88,673	182,643	48,542	936	7,010	4,209	617,613
Total		99,071	32,376	67,729	24,377	14,271	206,149	120,598	190,110	282,900	79,990	2,362	11,193	6,900	1,065,709

Note :

For Field of Education: The data takes into account the coding of Combined Courses to two fields of education.

As a consequence, counting both fields of education for Combined Courses means that the totals may be less than the sum of all broad fields of education.

Appendix B Overseas Students by Gender, Broad Course and Field of Education: 2016 Enrolments

2016 Enrolment Data		Natural and Physical Sciences	Information Technology	Engineering and Related Technologies	Architecture and Building	Agriculture Environment al and Related	Health	Education	Management and Commerce	Society and Culture	Creative Arts	Food Hospitality and Personal Services	Mixed Field Programs	Non-Award course	Total
Male	Postgraduate	4,387	13,349	14,223	1,861	1,219	3,410	1,605	38,614	5,114	1,009	12			84,493
	Undergraduate	5,404	13,049	20,546	2,075	831	5,953	186	54,572	6,427	3,836	177			111,910
	Enabling								217	81	84		669		1,051
	Non-Award													4,957	4,957
	Total	9,791	26,398	34,769	3,936	2,050	9,363	1,791	93,403	11,622	4,929	189	669	4,957	202,411
Female	Postgraduate	4,106	4,604	3,978	1,780	1,265	5,582	4,314	39,349	7,305	2,489	17			74,483
	Undergraduate	6,274	3,014	4,608	2,008	1,079	13,827	1,675	57,552	10,672	6,576	125			106,021
	Enabling								178	25	48		760		1,011
	Non-Award													7,553	7,553
	Total	10,380	7,618	8,586	3,788	2,344	19,409	5,989	97,079	18,002	9,113	142	760	7,553	189,068
	Total Overseas	20,176	34,016	43,355	7,724	4,397	28,775	7,780	190,485	29,624	14,045	331	1,429	12,514	391,500
	Total All Student	119,247	66,392	111,084	32,101	18,668	234,924	128,378	380,595	312,524	94,035	2,693	12,622	19,414	1,457,209

Note :

For Field of Education: The data takes into account the coding of Combined Courses to two fields of education.

As a consequence, counting both fields of education for Combined Courses means that the totals may be less than the sum of all broad fields of education.

Appendix C Percentage Domestic and Overseas Females by Course Level and Field of education: 2016 Enrolments

		Natural and Physical Sciences	Information Technology	Engineering and Related Technologies	Architecture and Building	Agriculture Environmental and Related	Health	Education	Management and Commerce	Society and Culture	Creative Arts	Food Hospitality and Personal Services	Total
% Domestic Female	Postgraduate	48.5%	26.8%	20.7%	43.4%	55.4%	70.0%	72.1%	43.8%	64.3%	64.6%	0.0%	58.4%
	Undergraduate	50.1%	14.1%	14.6%	37.6%	51.7%	73.9%	76.4%	47.6%	64.9%	60.7%	78.4%	57.8%
% Overseas Female	Postgraduate	48.3%	25.6%	21.9%	48.9%	50.9%	62.1%	72.9%	50.5%	58.8%	71.2%	58.6%	46.9%
	Undergraduate	53.7%	18.8%	18.3%	49.2%	56.5%	69.9%	90.0%	51.3%	62.4%	63.2%	41.4%	48.6%

Appendix D Percentage Distribution between Fields of Education by Gender for Domestic and Overseas Students: 2016 Enrolments

2016 Percentage Distribution Enrolments		Natural and Physical Sciences	Information Technology	Engineering and Related Technologies	Architecture and Building	Agriculture Environmental and Related Studies	Health	Education	Management and Commerce	Society and Culture	Creative Arts
	P'grad % Dist'n	6.6%	4.2%	8.7%	3.0%	1.6%	14.3%	10.9%	26.4%	21.9%	2.7%
Domestic Male	U'grad % Dist'n	12.8%	6.9%	14.5%	3.6%	1.5%	12.4%	5.6%	22.4%	22.6%	8.2%
	Total % Dist'n	11.1%	6.0%	12.8%	3.3%	1.5%	12.4%	6.8%	22.7%	22.4%	7.0%
	P'grad % Dist'n	4.4%	1.1%	1.6%	1.6%	1.4%	23.8%	20.0%	14.7%	28.1%	3.5%
Domestic Female	U'grad % Dist'n	9.4%	0.8%	1.8%	1.6%	1.2%	25.5%	13.1%	14.9%	30.5%	9.3%
	Total % Dist'n	8.0%	0.9%	1.7%	1.5%	1.2%	24.4%	14.6%	14.4%	29.6%	7.9%
	P'grad % Dist'n	5.2%	15.8%	16.8%	2.2%	1.4%	4.0%	1.9%	45.7%	6.1%	1.2%
Overseas Male	U'grad % Dist'n	4.8%	11.7%	18.4%	1.9%	0.7%	5.3%	0.2%	48.8%	5.7%	3.4%
	Total % Dist'n	4.8%	13.0%	17.2%	1.9%	1.0%	4.6%	0.9%	46.1%	5.7%	2.4%
	P'grad % Dist'n	5.5%	6.2%	5.3%	2.4%	1.7%	7.5%	5.8%	52.8%	9.8%	3.3%
Overseas Female	U'grad % Dist'n	5.9%	2.8%	4.3%	1.9%	1.0%	13.0%	1.6%	54.3%	10.1%	6.2%
	Total % Dist'n	5.5%	4.0%	4.5%	2.0%	1.2%	10.3%	3.2%	51.3%	9.5%	4.8%
Total Domestic		9.3%	3.0%	6.4%	2.3%	1.3%	19.3%	11.3%	17.8%	26.5%	7.5%
Total Overseas		5.2%	8.7%	11.1%	2.0%	1.1%	7.3%	2.0%	48.7%	7.6%	3.6%
Total Dom+O/S		8.2%	4.6%	7.6%	2.2%	1.3%	16.1%	8.8%	26.1%	21.4%	6.5%

The percentages shown may sum to more than 100% because combined courses may be coded to two fields of education