

A Rough Measure

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Good morning

The health marker of higher education aspiration in Australia, the sector's equivalent to a cholesterol reading, is the Australian Bureau of Statistics' [Survey of Education and Work](#). It comes around every year, a month or so before Christmas – decent warning time if you need to take corrective action before the summer break. Its estimates of the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with bachelor's qualifications have served as a proxy for higher education attainment ever since [reviewer Denise Bradley](#) proposed a target back in 2008.

Bradley recommended a goal of 40 per cent of young adults with higher education qualifications by 2020. Then education minister Julia Gillard opted for a more conservative deadline of 2025. We'll know how we went when the ABS releases this year's Survey of Education and Work later today, eastern time, but few will be holding their breath. We reached the target back in 2019 and were sitting at about 47 per cent this time last year. Gillard's conservatism turned out to be unwarranted.

The question now is whether the steady rise in attainment over the past decade or so will continue, amid [scepticism](#) about the pay-off from traditional degrees in a world of generative AI and Google Career Certificates. Anecdotally, school leavers are increasingly opting for trades on the rationale that they won't amass student debts or be replaced by ChatGPT. And as higher education participation rises, it's getting harder to stand out in the crowd. According to Victoria University's [Mitchell](#)

[Institute](#), the earnings premium from degrees has roughly halved in the past few decades.

Reverse articulation, where people with degrees go and do vocational courses, used to have an almost alternative vibe – something imaginative people did if they weren't too caught up on prestige, and wanted to add some tech cred to their airy-fairy qualifications. [New research](#) from the Mackenzie Research Institute puts it in a different light. Reverse articulation is something people do when the degree didn't pay off work-wise and they need some tech cred to keep their second-tier jobs.

And while higher education attainment has been rising, so has the gulf between women – who keep drinking the higher ed Kool-Aid – and men, who are decidedly more sceptical. In 2008, when Bradley was doing her review, women were seven percentage points ahead of men in higher education attainment. The gap was nine percentage points in 2011, 11 percentage points in 2019 and 13 percentage points last year.

Whether it's grown again this year, we'll find out in a few hours. Like cholesterol, the Survey of Education and Work is a rough measure. But like cholesterol, it can signpost looming blockages in the arterial flow, and you ignore it at your peril.



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