

Why independent higher education?

A guide for stakeholders



In Australia, parents and families make important decisions about where their children gain an education.

This document has been produced for education stakeholders to help understand the importance of independent higher education in Australia.

For preschool, primary and secondary school education, independent (non-government) education providers feature prominently or are the provider of choice.

Between one third and two thirds of children are educated at an independent (private or a non-government) preschool, primary or secondary school.

But only approximately 8 per cent of domestic higher education students attend an independent higher education provider despite the fact that in 2023 the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) showed:

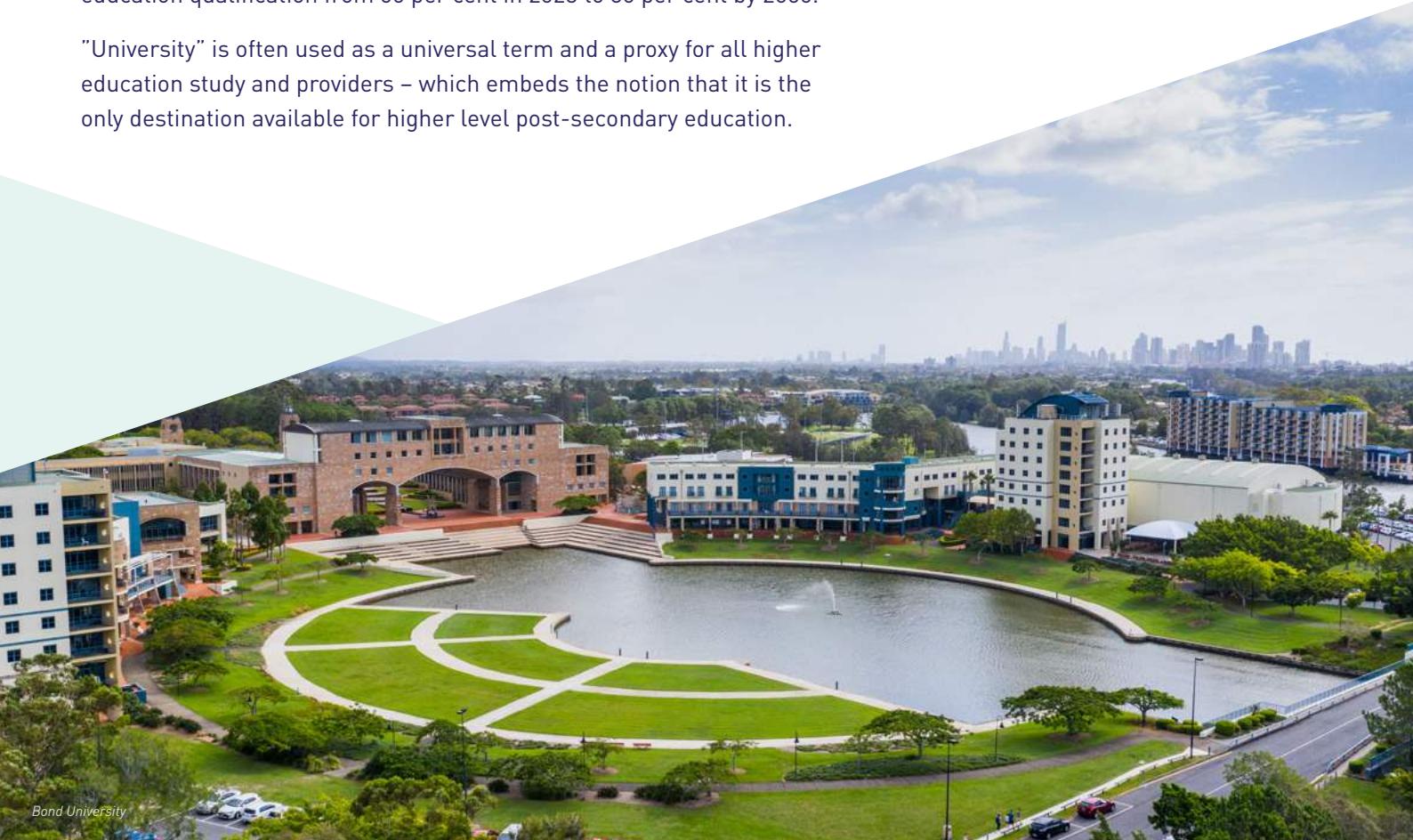
- the majority of top-ranked providers across each category were independent providers; and
- the top three Australian universities for quality of education experience were independent universities.

This highlights an untapped potential and opportunity for Australian students and, more broadly, for the Australian Government to increase tertiary education qualification from 60 per cent in 2023 to 80 per cent by 2050.

"University" is often used as a universal term and a proxy for all higher education study and providers – which embeds the notion that it is the only destination available for higher level post-secondary education.



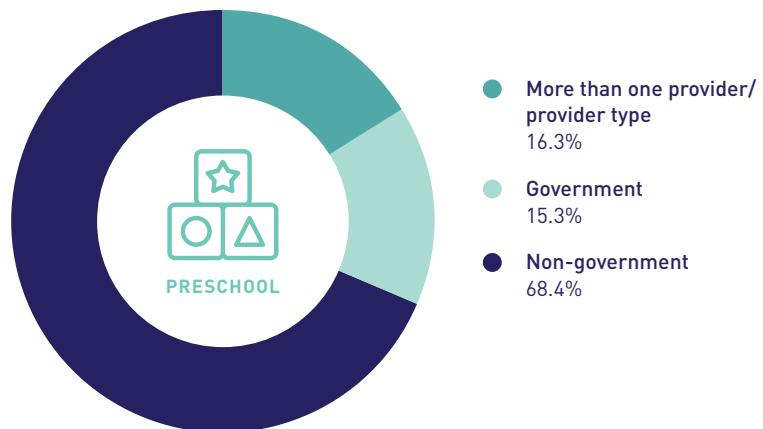
Between one third and two thirds of children are educated at an independent (private or a non-government) preschool, primary or secondary school.



Independent is a **provider of choice** for preschool and school

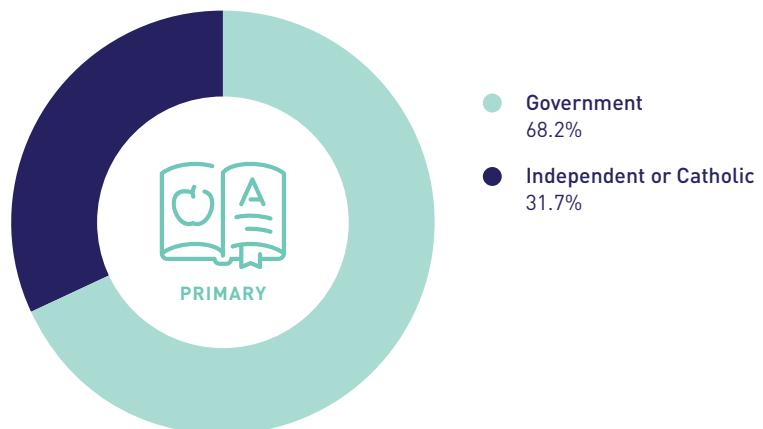
Preschool

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Preschool Education 2024 release shows that **68.4 per cent of 4 year old and 5 year old children** enrolled in preschool were at an independent (non-government) preschool. With 16.3 per cent attending “more than one provider type”, independent usage potentially rises to 82.1 percent.



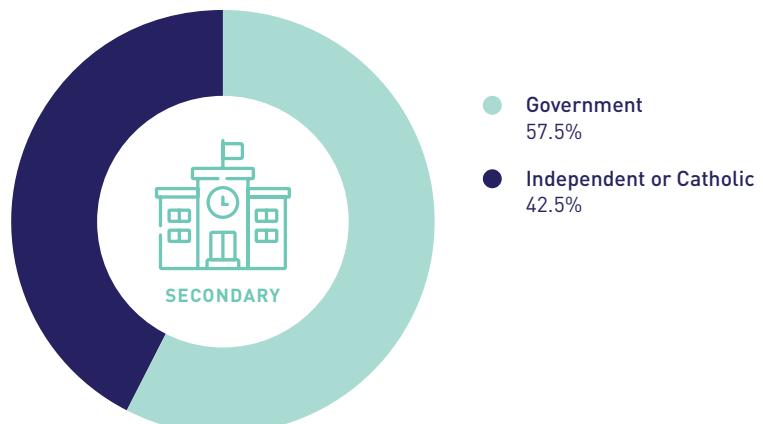
National primary school enrolments

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has produced data drawn from the National Schools Statistics Collection shows that in 2024 **31.7 per cent of primary school children** (Kindergarten/Prep to Year 6) children were enrolled at an independent or Catholic (non-government) school.



National secondary school enrolments

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority has produced data drawn from the National Schools Statistics Collection showing that in 2024 **42.5 per cent of secondary school children** (Year 7 or 8 to Year 12) were enrolled at an independent or Catholic (non-government) school.



Misconceptions about independent providers



History and experience

Australia's first higher education providers was established in 1815.



Aren't public universities better?

Independent providers consistently rank highest in QILT across Australia.



Will I receive the individual support I need?

Independent providers tend to be specialists with small class sizes.



The world's best universities

Are there any independent providers amongst the world's best? Independent universities are amongst the world's elite, here and overseas.





HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE

More than 200 years of independent higher education

Virtually all histories of higher education in Australia default to saying that the first provider was the University of Sydney established in 1850, although it was not open for students until 1852. The University of Melbourne was then established in 1853.

Whilst it is true that they were the first universities, it is not true that they were the first providers of higher education.

Unlike these two public providers there were a number of independent, or non-government, higher education providers established before these institutions.

Australia's first higher education provider, the Parramatta Seminary, was established as early as 1815.

The first higher education provider in Australia was established in 1815 and was independent.



In total, five providers were established between 1815 and 1845 and preceded the first public university.

One of these, St James College, was created in 1845. The founders of St James College were then involved in creating Moore College in 1856, and remarkably Moore College, a University College, still exists and is Australia's longest continuously operating independent higher education provider.



Moore Theological College is an independent higher education provider and a member of IHEA and has operated continuously since 1856.



THE WORLD'S BEST UNIVERSITIES

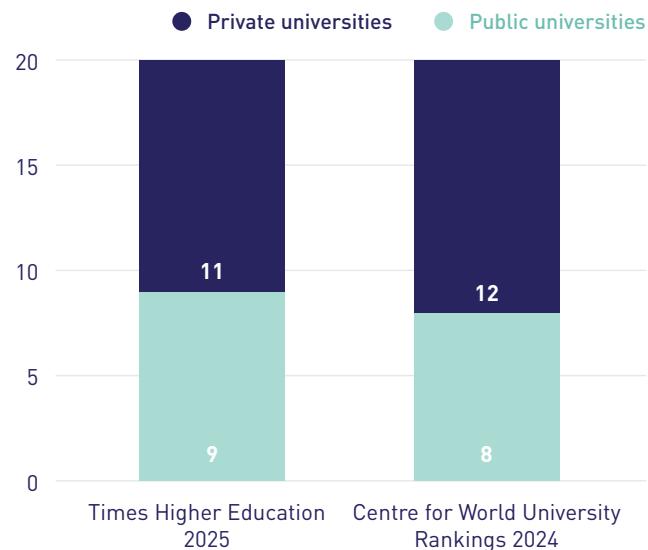
Independent providers are amongst the elite worldwide

Independent providers make up most of the top 20 universities in the world. The list includes famous names like Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology.

This reflects the value and quality of performance of independent providers on a global stage. On their merits, they are ranked with the best.

Of the independent providers featured in the rankings, the smallest enrols around 2,000 students and the largest approximately 26,000 students, according to the latest data. This counteracts any perception of "bigger is best" when it comes to the best institutions. In fact, it refutes that assertion entirely.

The highest ranked independent (private) universities globally achieve such an outcome through quality of education provision and student experience rather than scale and size.



Independent
universities
are amongst the
world's best.





PERSONALISED Independent quality providers cater to students' individual needs

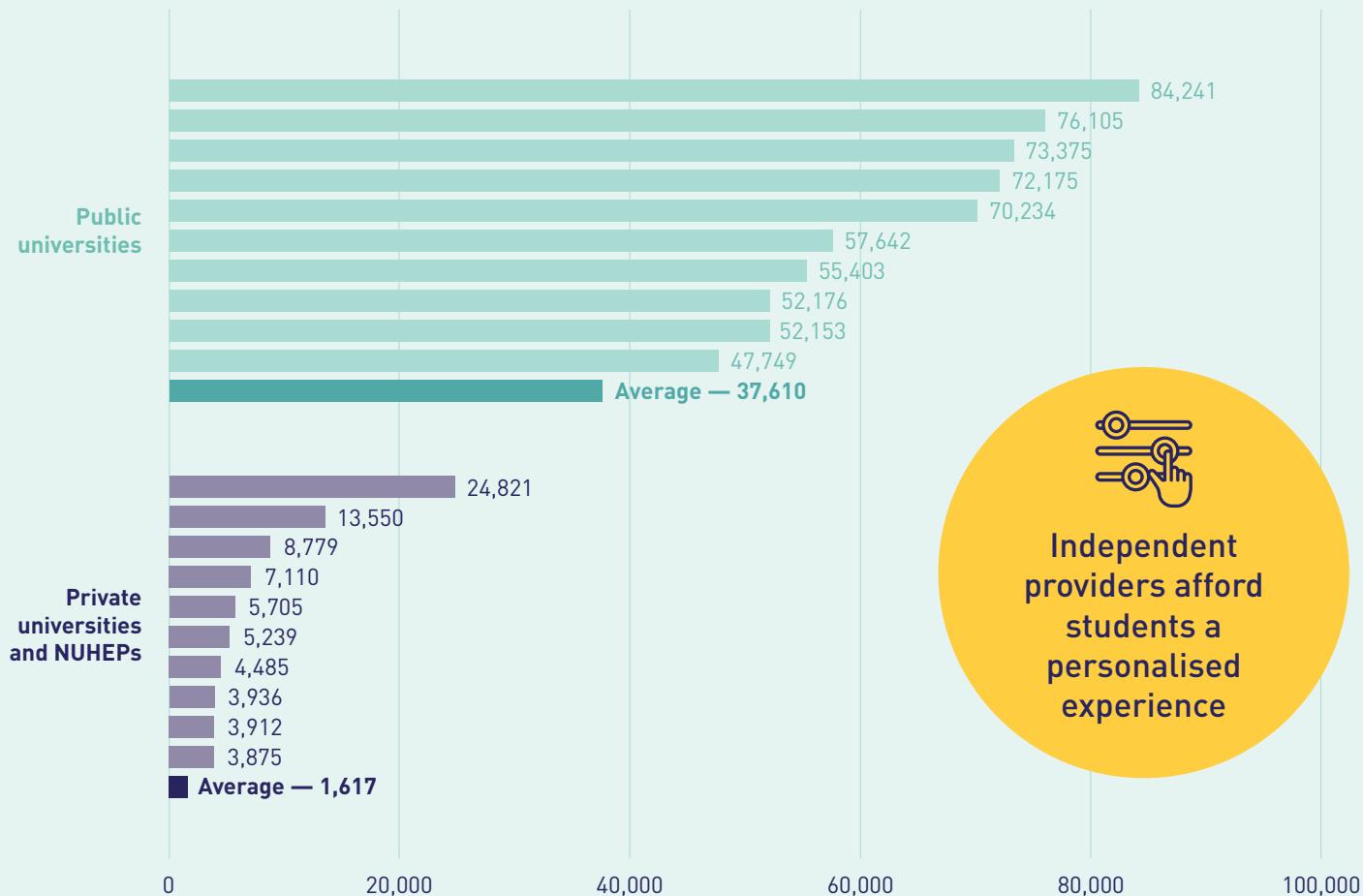
A big appeal of independent providers is that they are smaller, with small class sizes, and offer a more personalised experience. This can enhance learning and increase opportunities for engagement with academic staff.

In 2023, data produced by the Australian Department of Education shows that the 38 public universities enrolled a total of 1,429,190 students, or an average of 37,610 students. By comparison, 106 independent providers (private universities and non-university higher education provider or NUHEPs) enrolled 171,350 students at an average of 1,617 students.

Of the public universities, five had more than 70,000 students, nine more than 50,000 students and 26 with more than 30,000 students. By comparison, of the private universities and NUHEPs, only one provider enrolled more than 20,000 students, two more than 10,000, with six more than 5,000.

Clearly, mega public universities are not the only answer to meeting student needs and demand. Ensuring that independent higher education providers are part of any growth and quality strategy will be paramount. Globally, this is already the case.

Largest providers in Australia by student numbers





QUALITY

Independent consistently equals the best quality

The number of students enrolled in private universities and NUHEPs is far less (by 95.7 per cent) on average than at public universities.

Students themselves say that they have a high quality experience through the annual Student Experience Survey (SES) commissioned by the Australian Department of Education as part of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT).

The QILT SES survey looks at a number of focus groups, such as Skills Development; Peer Engagement; Teaching Quality and Engagement; Student Support and Services; Learning Resources; and an overall assessment as Quality of Entire Educational Experiences.

In 2023, the top ranked provider as rated by undergraduate or postgraduate coursework students against each focus group was an independent provider and in 11/12 cases it was an IHEA member.

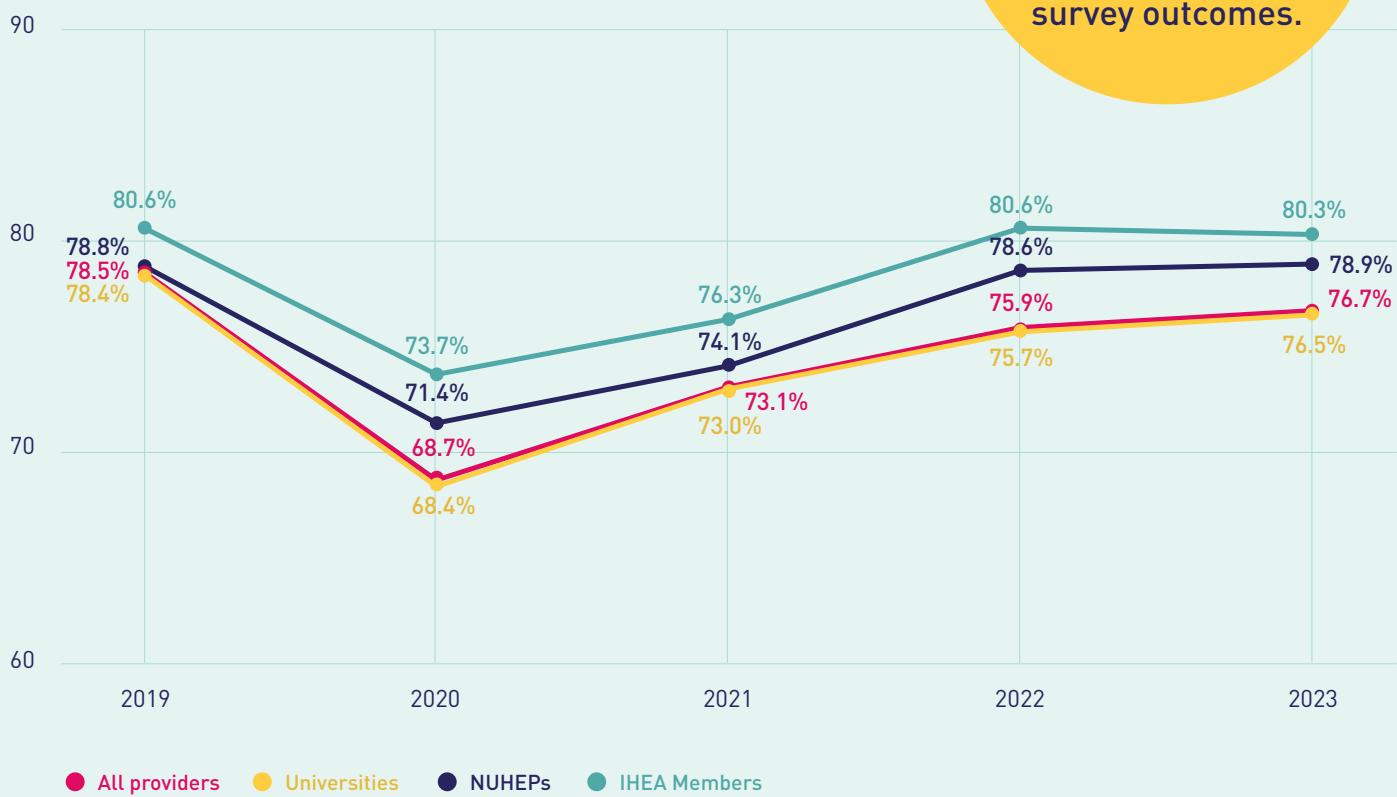
Amongst universities only, the top three rated providers for Quality of the Entire Educational Experience amongst undergraduate students were private universities.

For postgraduate coursework students three private universities were rated in the top 7 of all universities (first, third and seventh). The quality of independent higher education providers is well established in Australia, as it is globally.



Independent providers continue to lead the way in student experience survey outcomes.

Quality of entire educational experience - undergraduate students





CONCLUSION

Independent higher education providers are the future

Independent education providers are often a provider of choice and a common pathway for parents of preschool and school age children.

It stands to reason that this choice is made in the best interests of the child's education, wellbeing and/or to fit their particular needs and interests.

But this trend ends when it comes to higher education, and that is not in the best interests of many students who default to public universities.

Independent providers are student focused and are an obvious solution to enable the government to reach its target to increase tertiary attainment from 60 per cent to 80 per cent by 2050.

It is also in the national interest to support more students to attain a higher education qualification, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds. Enrolling record numbers of marginalised or disadvantaged students may require a more specialised and bespoke offering. Independent higher education providers already proving themselves as the right option for those needing smaller class sizes and a more personalised learning experience.

A little known fact is that there is a rich tradition and history of independent higher education provision that pre-dates even the first public university. Recent approaches to assessing the quality of the student experience provide a resounding tick to independent higher education providers: we are amongst the best in Australia.

Independent providers are an established and important to the future of the economy - the direct financial contribution of the 16.0 per cent of international students who attend independent providers is \$4.7b.

This rich history and experience sees independent higher education providers as dedicated in serving their students and the community and in making a significant contribution to the national and local economies.

Two things that matter are experience and a focus on students achieving their best.

And all of this is in the face of policy settings that often preference a public university over an independent higher education provider.

The independent higher education sector supports puts students and student choice first.

This helps students fulfill their dreams and provide Australians with a contemporary and innovative range of higher education qualifications to meet the nation's future workforce needs.

Independent providers are amongst the best in the world and continue to deliver an exceptional student experience in Australia.

IHEA Member Institutions

Universities

Australian University of Theology

Avondale University

Bond University

Torrens University

University of Divinity

University Colleges

ACAP University College

Alphacrucis University College

Australian University College of Divinity

Excelsia University College

Moore Theological College

SAE University College

Institutes of Higher Education

Academies Australasia Polytechnic

Academy of Interactive Technology

Acknowledge Education

Adelaide Central School of Art

ABII Higher Education

Australasian Academy of Higher Education

Australasian College of Health and Wellness

Australian College of Christian Studies

Australian College of Nursing

Australian College of Physical Education

Australian College of the Arts (COLARTS)

Australian Institute of Business and Management

Australian Institute of Management Business School

Australian Institute of Music

Barton Business School

Campion College Australia

Christian Heritage College

Crown Institute of Higher Education

Eastern College Australia

Education Centre of Australia

Asia Pacific International College

ECA College of Health Sciences

Higher Education Leadership Institute

Endeavour College of Natural Health

EQUALS International

Governance Institute of Australia

Holmes Institute

ICHM

Ikon Institute of Australia

Institute of Health and Management

International College of Management, Sydney

Kaplan Business School

Laurus Higher Education

LCI Melbourne

Le Cordon Bleu Australia

Leaders Institute

Lyons College

Marcus Oldham College

Morling College

Nan Tien Institute

National Academy of Professional Studies - NAPS

National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia

Navitas

College of Business and Technology

Edith Cowan College

Educational Enterprises Australia

Melbourne Institute of Business and Technology

Navitas Bundoora

Queensland Institute of Business and Technology

South Australian Institute of Business and Technology

Sydney Institute of Business and Technology

Western Sydney University International College

Oxford Institute of Higher Education

Photography Studies College

Polytechnic Institute Australia

Sheridan Institute of Higher Education

Skyline Higher Education Australia

SP Jain School of Global Management

Sydney Institute of Higher Education

Sydney International School of Technology and Commerce

Sydney Metropolitan Institute of Technology

Tabor College Australia

The Australian Data and Cyber Institute

The College of Law

The MIECAT Institute

The Tax Institute Higher Education HEPCO

Torrens Global Education Services

Think: Colleges

Universal Business School Sydney

Universal Higher Education

UoW College

Wentworth Institute of Higher Education

Whitecliffe | The Fashion Institute