INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

Why independent higher education?

A guide for stakeholders



IHEA INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

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.



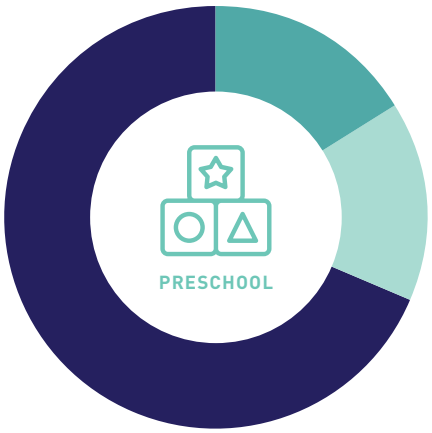
Bond University

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

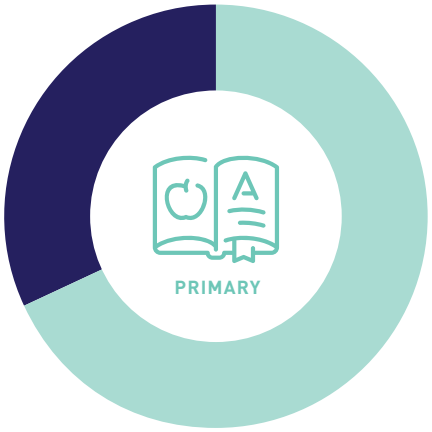
Preschool

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.



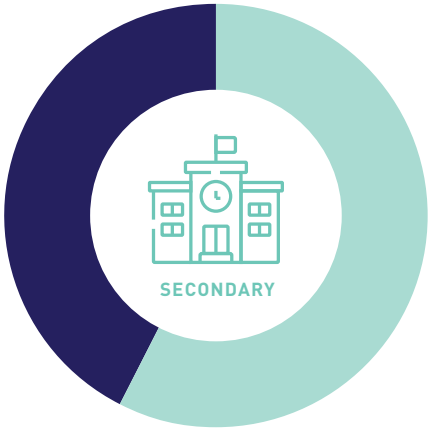
National primary school enrolments

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.



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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.



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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.



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THE WORLD'S BEST UNIVERSITIES

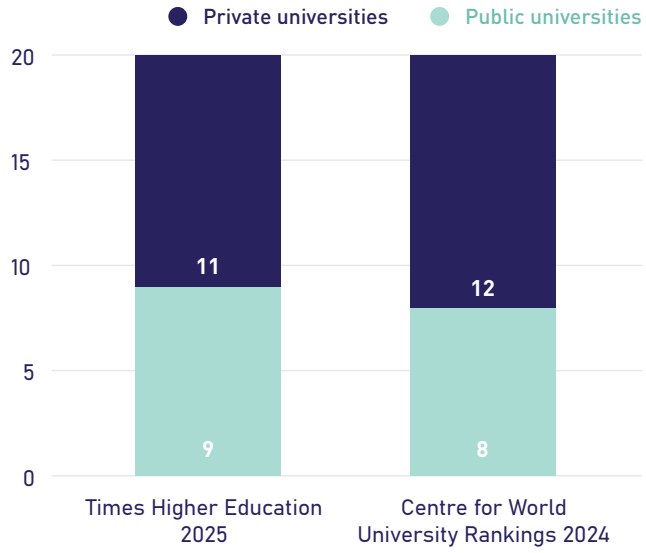
Independent providers are amongst the elite worldwide

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.



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PERSONALISED

Independent quality providers cater to students' individual needs

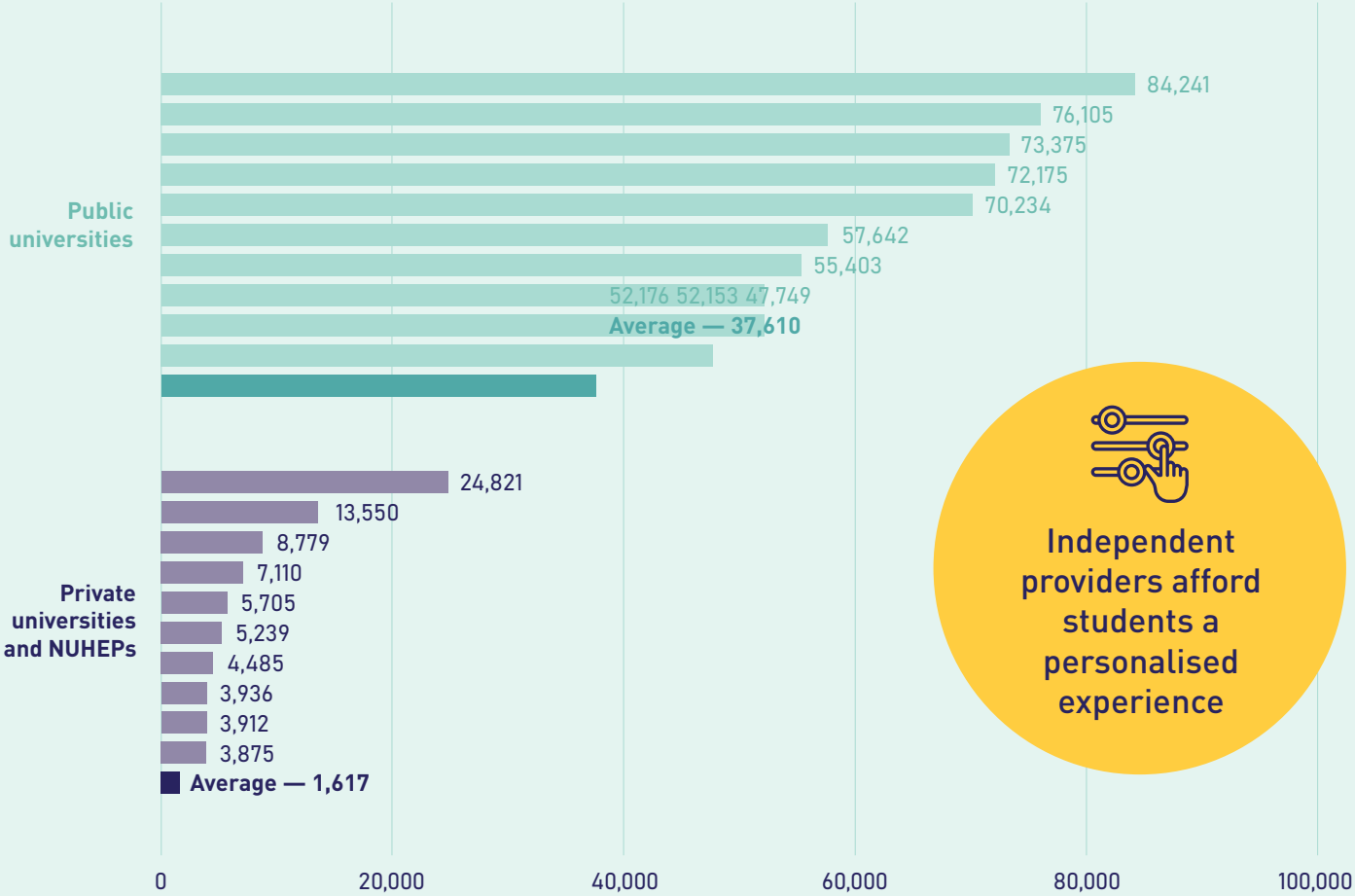
A big appeal of independent providers is that they are smaller, with small class sizes, and offer a more personalised experience. This can enhance learning and increase opportunities for engagement with academic staff.

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



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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.

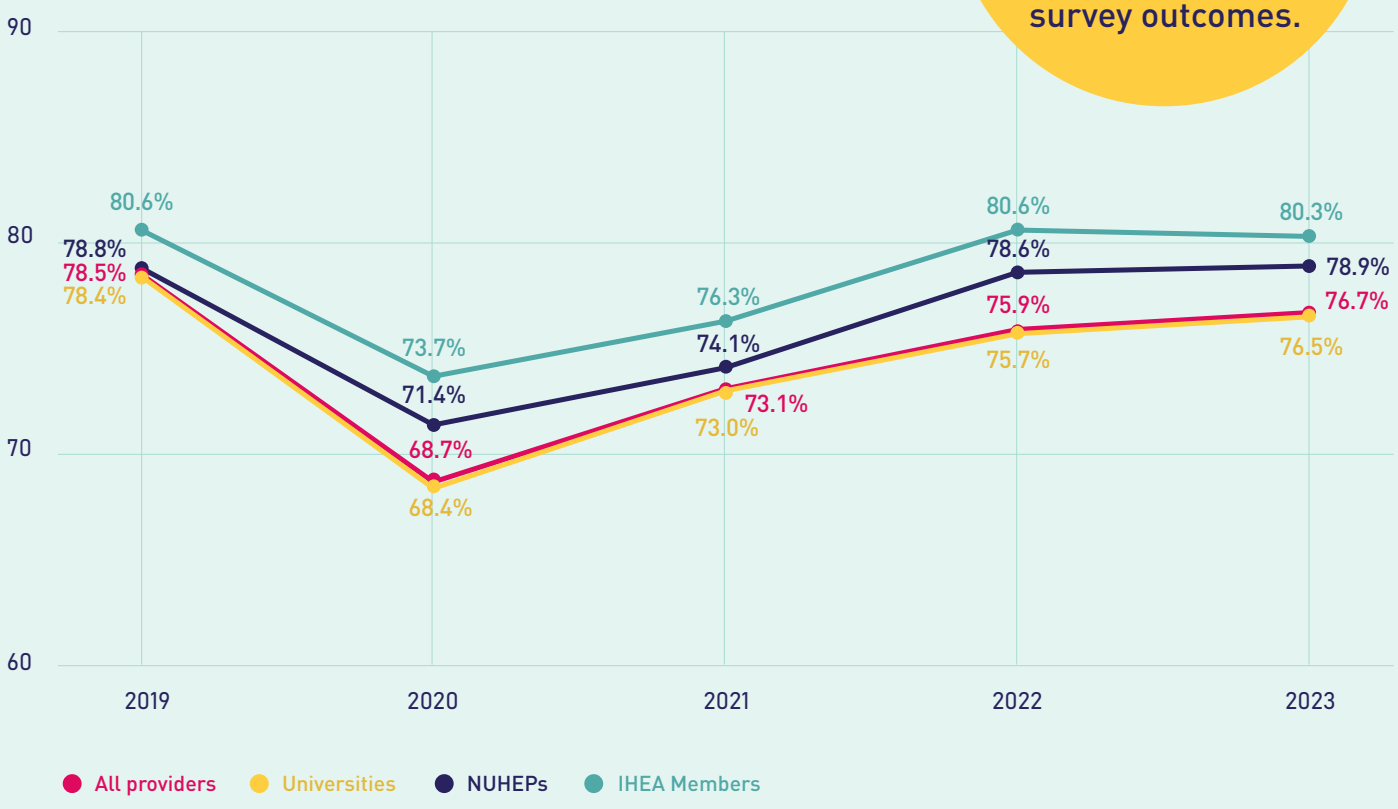
In 2023, the top ranked provider as rated by undergraduate or postgraduate coursework students against each focus group was an independent provider and in 11/12 cases it was an IHEA member.

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



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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

Information current as at 27 November 2026

IHEA INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

Universities

- Australian University of Theology
- Avondale University
- Bond University
- Torrens University Australia
- 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
- AIBI Higher Education
- AIM Business School
- Atlas Higher Education and Development Pty Ltd (AHEAD)
- Australasian Academy of Higher Education
- Australasian College of Health and Wellness
- Australian Chiropractic College
- Australian College of Christian Studies
- Australian College of Nursing
- The Australian College of Physical Education
- Australian Data and Cyber Institute
- The Australian Institute of Music
- Barton Business School
- Campion College Australia
- Central Institute of Technology and Innovation
- Christian Heritage College
- CIHE Australia
- COLLARTS
- The College of Law
- 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
- Fairmont College Australia
- Gateway Business College
- Governance Institute of Australia
- Holmes Institute
- IBC Education
- iCareers Institute
- ICHM
- Ikon Institute of Australia
- International College of Management, Sydney
- International School of Global Leaders
- JMC Academy
- Kaplan Business School
- Kaplan Higher Education
- King's Own Institute
- Laurus Higher Education
- LCI Melbourne
- Le Cordon Bleu Australia
- Leaders Institute
- Lyons College
- Marcus Oldham College
- MIECAT
- Morling College
- Nan Tien Institute
- National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia
- Navitas
  - Curtin College
  - Edith Cowan College
  - Eynesbury College
  - Deakin College
  - La Trobe College Australia
  - Griffith College
  - SAIBT
  - SIBT
  - Western Sydney University International College
- Photography Studies College
- Polytechnic Institute Australia
- Russo Business School
- Sheridan Institute of Higher Education
- Skyline Higher Education Australia
- S P Jain School of Global Management
- Stanley College
- Sydney Institute of Higher Education
- Sydney International School of Technology and Commerce
- Sydney Met
- Southern Academy of Higher Education
- Tabor College
- The Tax Institute Higher Education
- Torrens University Australia
  - Think: Colleges
- Universal Business School Sydney
- Universal Higher Education
- UoW College
- UTS College
- Wentworth Institute