

## 20 Education

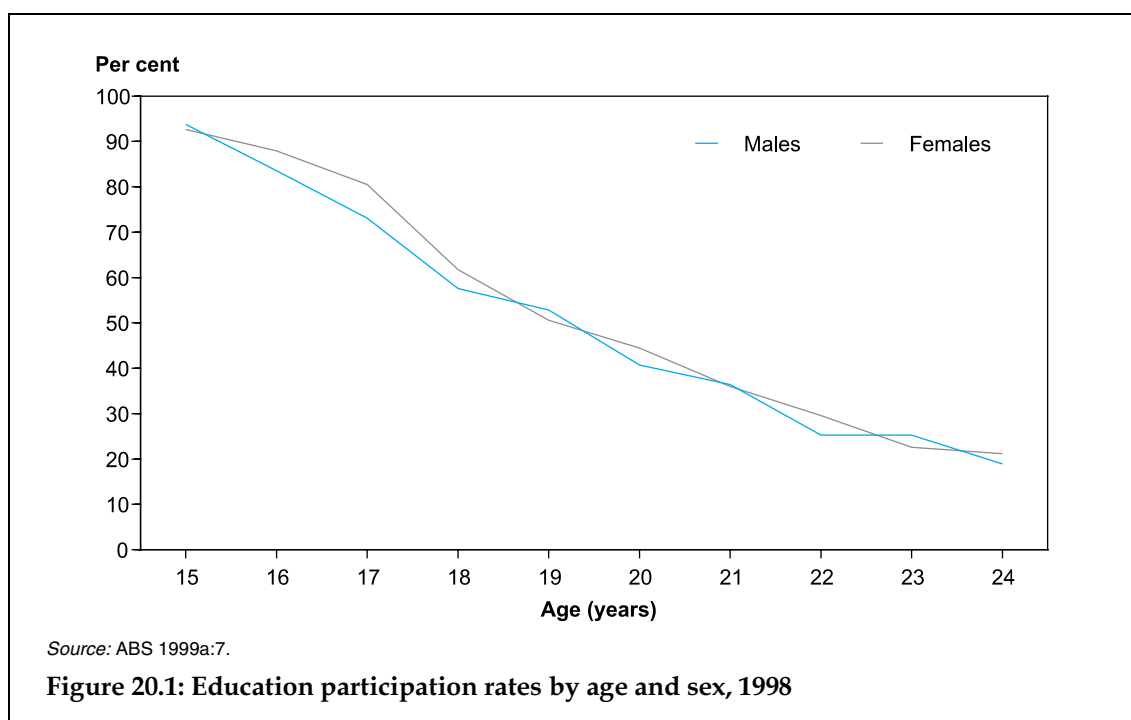
Access to and use of educational opportunities are important for young people, because they are at the ages when compulsory education is finishing and much of the further education and training for the workforce occurs. Completion of secondary education, usually Year 12, is considered important preparation for full participation in many aspects of adult life, including the workforce. Increasingly, some education or training beyond Year 12 is also required for many jobs. People without these levels of educational attainment are considerably disadvantaged. Education is therefore an important component of the overall wellbeing of this age group.

Subjects covered in this chapter include participation in education, apparent retention rates, educational attainment, and literacy levels of the youth population. Data for participation and retention rates are from the National Schools Statistics Collection, which is maintained by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Educational attainment is measured annually by the ABS in a supplementary survey as part of the Monthly Population Survey. Literacy was measured by the ABS in 1996 in a special national survey of the population aged 15–74 years.

### Participation rates

The ABS undertakes an annual survey, usually in September, of participation in education as part of the Monthly Population Survey. The scope for this supplementary survey of education participation is the population aged 15–24 years. Attendance at school is compulsory for children up to age 15 in most States and Territories.

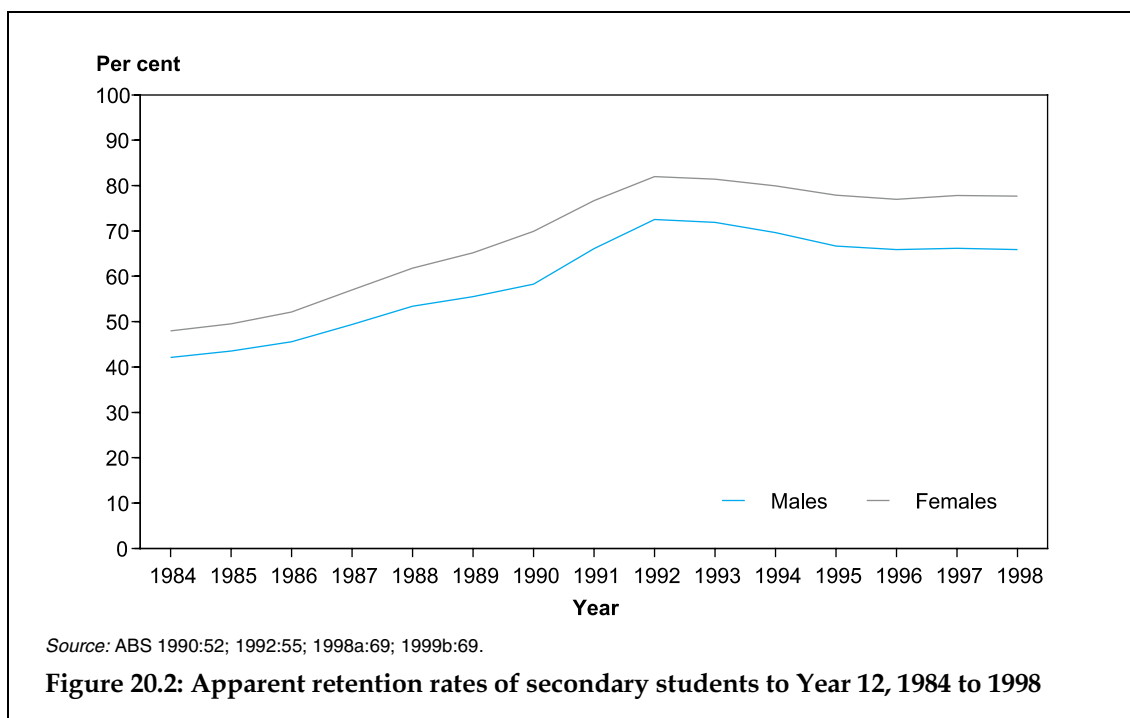
The education participation rate is 'the number of persons attending an educational institution in any group expressed as a percentage of the civilian population in the same group' (ABS 1999a:26). Figure 20.1 charts the rates for males and females at each single year of age, from 15 to 24 years. The rates used here include both full- and part-time participation, and cover attendance at any institution with a primary role of education (schools, secondary colleges, colleges of technical and further education, higher education establishments).



- Participation rates at age 15 were around 93% for both males and females in 1998.
- The rates begin to decline after age 15, when schooling is no longer compulsory. The decline is more marked among males than females. At age 17, for example, the rates were 73% for males and 81% for females.
- By age 19, when most young people have completed secondary schooling, participation rates were around 50%.
- About 25% of those aged 23 years were still participating in some form of education, and about 20% of those aged 24.

## Apparent retention rates

An indication of the proportion of young people continuing through secondary school is the 'apparent retention rate' to Year 12. This is the percentage of students of a given cohort group who continue from the beginning of secondary school (Year 7 in some jurisdictions, Year 8 in others) to Year 12. The trends in apparent retention rates to Year 12, from 1984 to 1998, are shown in Figure 20.2.



- Retention rates rose steadily from 1984 to 1992 for both males and females, from 42% for males and 48% for females in 1984 to 73% for males and 82% for females in 1992.
- Retention rates have declined since 1992, and in 1998 were 66% for males and 78% for females.
- Female rates have been about 10% greater than male rates each year since 1989.

### Educational attainment

The term 'educational attainment' refers to 'the highest post-school educational qualification attained by the respondent' (ABS 1998b:29). The ABS has established a classification for these qualifications with seven categories. In Table 20.1, these have been collapsed into three categories, and are shown together with a breakdown of those without post-school qualifications. For the youth population, there are major differences between the two age groups, 15–19 years and 20–24 years, because many of the former are still 'at school' ('school' referring to a secondary school, not a tertiary institution), and thus the two groups are shown separately. The ABS, however, does not publish these data separately for males and females.

**Table 20.1: Educational attainment, 15–24 year olds, May 1998 (per cent)**

Educational attainment	Age (years)	
	15–19	20–24
<i>With post-school qualifications</i>	4.7	38.9
Bachelor or higher	0.0	11.8
Undergraduate or associate diploma	0.8	7.8
Vocational qualification: skilled or basic	3.9	19.3
<i>Without post-school qualifications</i>	44.5	60.8
Completed highest level of school	24.7	40.5
Attending tertiary	18.1	20.3
Not attending tertiary	6.7	20.2
<i>Did not complete highest level of school</i>	19.8	20.3
Attending tertiary	6.5	2.8
Not attending tertiary	13.3	17.6
<i>Still at school</i>	50.8	0.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Number ('000)</i>	1,296.8	1,343.0

Source: ABS 1998b:11.

- Just over half (51%) of the 15–19 years age group were still at school in 1998.
- Nearly 5% of this age group had completed some post-school qualification, and a further 25% had completed the highest level of school. For most, this would be Year 12.
- About one-fifth of the 15–19 year olds reported that they did not complete the highest level of school, but about one-third of these (7% overall) were attending a tertiary institution (defined as any institution offering a post-school qualification).
- For the age group 20–24 years, 39% in 1998 had achieved a post-school qualification, and a further 41% (thus 80% in total) had completed the highest level of schooling. One-fifth (20%) of this age group were attending a tertiary institution.

## Literacy levels

Attendance in courses can be considered to be 'educational input' measures. Although these are useful indicators of the levels of skills a group may have acquired, actual skill levels have been measured through the Aspects of Literacy Survey in 1996. This survey objectively assessed three types of literacy (ABS 1997:ix):

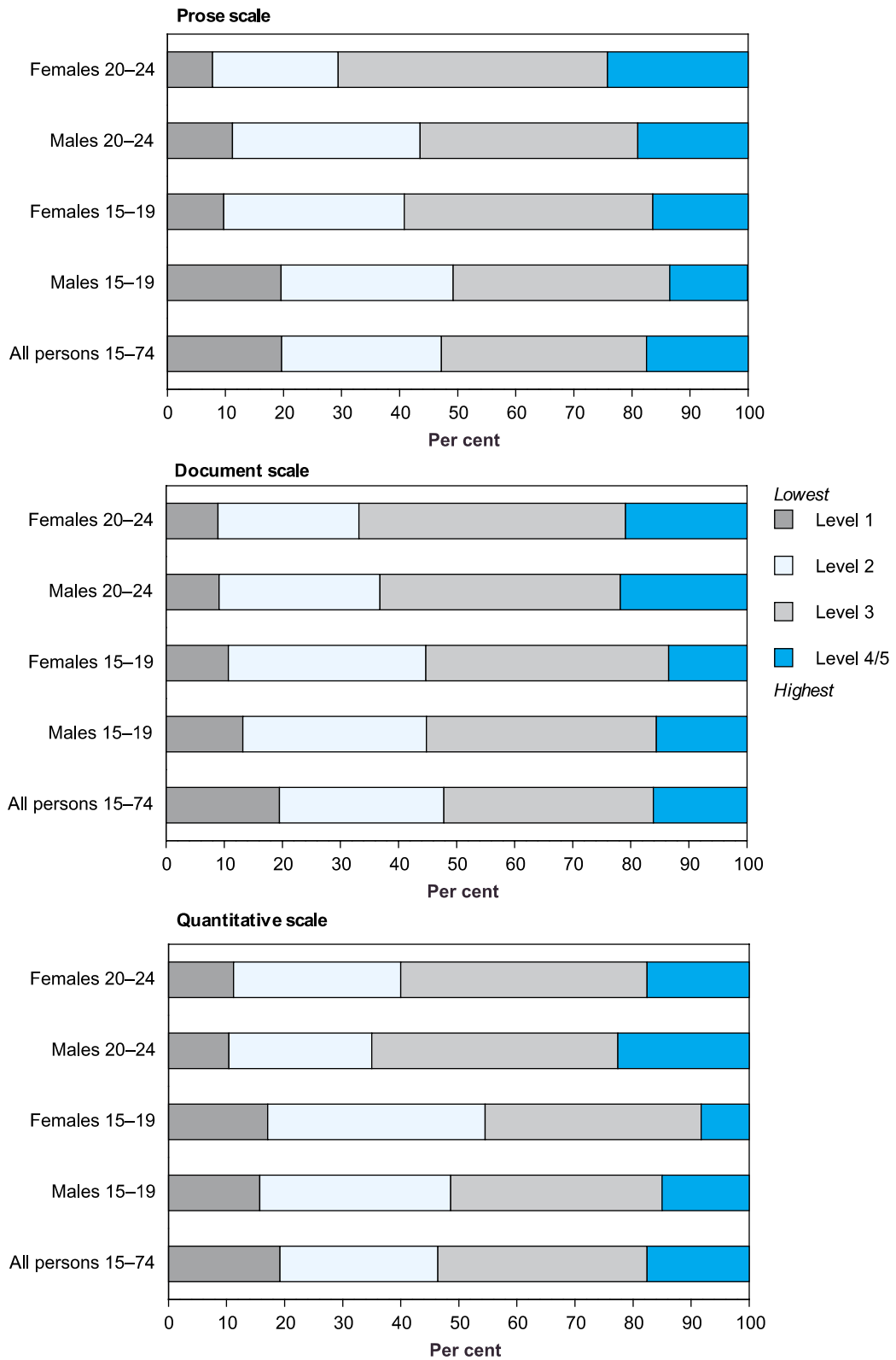
- prose literacy – the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of prose texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures;
- document literacy – the ability to locate and use information contained in materials such as tables, schedules, charts, graphs and maps; and
- quantitative literacy – the ability to perform arithmetic operations using numbers contained in printed texts or documents.

Literacy is defined as a continuum (as opposed to a dichotomy – 'literate' and 'illiterate') denoting how well people use printed material. Progression along this continuum is characterised by increased ability to 'process' (locate, integrate, match and generate) information and to draw correct inferences based on the information being used (ABS 1997:x). For analytical purposes, scores on the continuum for each of the three types of literacy are divided into five levels:

- level 1 – would experience considerable difficulties in using many of the printed materials encountered in daily life;
- level 2 – can use printed materials that are simple, short and clearly structured, or that require simple arithmetic operations on numbers easily determined from the source text;
- level 3 – can use longer, more complex printed material, take conditional information into account, make inferences, compare and contrast information, and extract numbers embedded in complex displays and perform more varied arithmetic operations;
- level 4 – can use higher order skills associated with (a) matching and integration of information, (b) making higher order inferences, and (c) performing arithmetic operations where either the quantities or the operation to be performed are not easily determined;
- level 5 – can make high-level inferences, use complex displays of information, process conditional information, and perform multiple operations sequentially.

Figure 20.4 illustrates the proportions in the youth population, by sex and age group, at each skill level for each of the three types of literacy. Level 5 was a relatively small level group (about 2% of the total population for each type), and therefore is combined with 4 for the purposes of this analysis.

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Source: ABS 1997:13-14.

**Figure 20.3: Skill levels of 15-24 year olds for prose, document and quantitative literacy, 1996**

- The age group 15–19 years, both males and females, have lower literacy skills (as measured by the lower proportions at level 4/5—‘good’ and ‘very good’) than the general population. According to the ABS (1997:5), many in this age group ‘will not yet have completed their education and will have little work experience, and therefore their literacy skills may develop further’.
- In contrast, the literacy skills of the age group 20–24 years, both males and females, were well above the population average, with higher proportions at level 4/5, and lower proportions at level 1 in all three types of literacy.
- For document literacy, differences between males and females for both age groups were minimal.
- Males in both age groups had higher skill level than females for quantitative literacy.
- Conversely, females had higher skills for prose literacy than males. In particular, 20% of males in the 15–19 years group had weak (level 1) prose literacy skills, compared with 10% of females in that age group.

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