

Chapter 5

Retrospect and prospect

The 1998 school year in Australia confirmed some trends that were previously apparent and, at the same time, set some new and important directions. This chapter attempts to examine each of these elements as well as look at the progress made by Australian schools towards the achievement of their national goals.

Enrolment patterns

To a very large degree, Australian schools derive their enrolments from that section of the population that is in the 5–19 year-old age group. In 1994, the size of this age group fell to a low of 3.833 million but then rose steadily and was 3.955 million in 1998. It is not surprising, therefore, that the total enrolment in schools increased slightly from 3.172 million in 1997 to 3.199 million in 1998. The same pattern, however, was not evident in the changes occurring in the size of the 0–4-year-old age group. This group increased in size in the early years of the decade and rose to a high of 1.297 million in 1996. Since that time it has fallen to 1.283 million in 1998. All other things being equal, it should be possible to discern the effect of this decline in the total school enrolments in the next few years.

Of course, the size of the total school enrolment is not determined solely by the population size. The extent to which students are retained in schools, particularly into the post-compulsory years, is a further significant factor. Some evidence on this issue is provided by apparent retention rates where the picture is one of sharp increases in the early years of the decade (from 64.0 per cent in 1990 to 77.1 per cent in 1992). The apparent retention rate to year 12 then fell to a low of 71.3 per cent in 1996 and was 71.6 per cent in 1998.

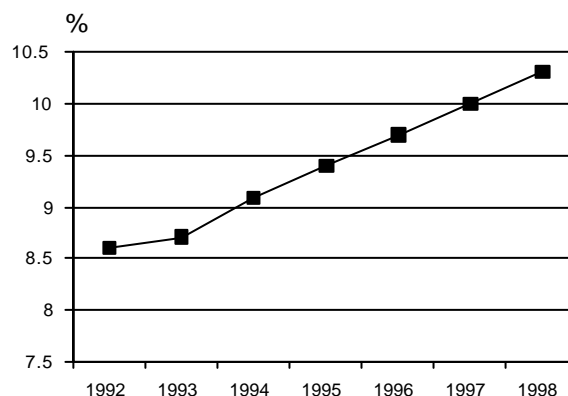
It is probable that age participation rates provide a more useful indicator of the extent to which students are accessing schooling in the post-compulsory years. For the 15–19-year-old age group, participation rates in schooling have risen steadily throughout the decade from 44.2 per cent in 1990 to

49.7 per cent in 1998. As in previous years, in 1998 there was a considerable difference between the participation rates for 15–19-year-old females (51.2 per cent) and the equivalent group of males (48.3 per cent).

In 1998, a previously apparent trend towards increasing enrolments in non-government schools and a corresponding decline in enrolment share in government schools was confirmed. In 1990, 72.1 per cent of all Australian students were enrolled in government schools. However, the government sector's share of enrolments has fallen steadily and in 1998 declined to 70.0 per cent. During the same period, the Catholic sector maintained a relatively constant share of enrolments (19.7 per cent in 1998), while enrolments in the independent sector increased sharply from 8.0 per cent in 1990 to 10.3 per cent in 1998, as illustrated in Figure 5.1

A further manifestation of this enrolment trend is apparent in the data pertaining to the number of schools. Between 1990 and 1998, the number of government schools declined by 6.6 per cent from 7,490 to 6,998 and, during the same period, the number of independent schools rose by 11.5 per cent from 803 to 895.

Figure 5.1 Enrolment share growth, independent schools, Australia, 1992–98 (per cent)



Source: ABS, *Schools, Australia, 1992–98*

The pattern of increased enrolments in non-government schools is apparent in both the primary and secondary sectors. In 1981, non-government schools held 20.6 per cent of the enrolments in primary schools and this increased steadily to 26.6 per cent in 1998. At the secondary level, the non-government sector held 27.1 per cent of the enrolments in 1981 and 34.8 per cent in 1998. Based on enrolments in 1997 and 1998, and using current levels of grade progression rates, it is estimated that, by the year 2008, enrolments in government schools will have risen slightly from 2.239 million in 1998 to 2.298 million and enrolments in non-government schools will have risen from 0.959 million in 1998 to 1.071 million. On the basis of this prediction, by the year 2008, non-government schools will attract 31.79 per cent of all enrolments compared to the 29.99 per cent they held in 1998. This estimate does not take into account the effects of any changes to government policy relating to either immigration or education and, in particular, does not reflect any change to government policy regarding the funding of non-government schools.

Teacher staffing

The overall ratio of pupils to teachers in Australian schools has remained fairly constant throughout the decade to date. In 1998 it was 15.3, as it was in 1990, and in the intervening years it has fluctuated between 15.3 and 15.5. This apparent consistency disguises a significant trend that becomes apparent when pupil–teacher ratios for primary and secondary schools are examined separately.

It is clear that ratios have risen slightly at the secondary level, but have fallen in the primary level. For example, the national ratio of pupils to teachers in the secondary area in 1993 was 12.4:1 and in the primary area in the same year it was 18.4:1. In 1998, the secondary figure had risen to 12.7:1, while the primary ratio was 17.9:1. This altered pattern may reflect changing attitudes to primary education and to early childhood schooling in particular. As well, it may result, at least in part, from the additional staffing resources being made available for literacy and numeracy programs in the early years of schooling.

Differences in pupil–teacher ratios were also evident between sectors of schooling. In general terms, the lowest ratios were in the independent sector and the highest were in the Catholic sector, while those applying in government schools lay somewhere in between. Differences between States were generally consistent across sectors. For example, the Northern Territory and Tasmania each had comparatively low pupil–

teacher ratios in both the independent and government sectors, while the Northern Territory and South Australia each had comparatively low ratios at the secondary level in both the Catholic and government sectors.

The changes that appear to be occurring between the primary and secondary levels are also apparent in State government spending on government schools. In 1998, and for Australia as a whole, State government per capita expenditure on primary students was \$4,975 and for secondary students it was \$6,628. This means that expenditure on each primary student was 75.1 per cent of the amount spent on each secondary student. This figure represents a significant increase on the 1994 per capita expenditures of \$4,048 and \$5,876 respectively, when the primary amount was 68.9 per cent of the secondary. There are also significant differences between States, with the primary per capita expenditure being below 70 per cent of secondary expenditure in South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory and above 80 per cent of secondary expenditure in South Australia and Tasmania.

In 1998, there was a continuation of the trend towards a change in the gender composition of the Australian teaching service. In 1990, 26.5 per cent of all primary teachers were male, as were 49.9 per cent of all secondary teachers. In 1998, however, these proportions had fallen to 22.5 per cent at the primary level and 46.5 per cent at the secondary level. In 1998, the size of Australia's teaching workforce experienced growth of just under 1 per cent over the 1997 level.

Some apparent trends

An examination of the reports provided by each of the States and Territories reveals a number of common elements that indicate some notable trends in Australian schooling. Among the movements that can be discerned are:

- changing school governance and management arrangements away from centralised structures towards local management, with a heightened role for parents and community
- a growing emphasis on the articulation of precise educational outcomes to be achieved and on the measurement and reporting of progress towards their achievement
- considerable activity related to the implementation of the national plan for literacy and numeracy. In particular, there

is strong evidence of programs involving assessment, diagnosis and intervention in the early years of schooling

- a rapid growth in the participation of senior secondary students in vocational education and training as part of their schooling.

Assessment and reporting

The changing nature and escalating sophistication of assessment and reporting processes are evident, from the national level to the individual school level. At the national level there is considerable activity, and, since the end of 1998, but prior to the publication of this report, Ministers have agreed upon the six areas from within the new national goals that will provide a basis for the first stage of more precise reporting. The six areas are literacy; numeracy; student participation, retention and completion; vocational education and training in schools; science; and information technology.

As well, MCEETYA has established a National Education Performance Monitoring Taskforce with a mandate to progress action relating to the national reporting of comparable educational outcomes. As part of its work, the Taskforce has been charged with the development of key performance measures as the basis for national reporting in each of the agreed areas listed above. The work on performance measures, targets and definitions which was begun by the National Goals Taskforce will now be taken up by the new taskforce.

An example of the progress being made in establishing improved national reporting arrangement is provided by developments in the area of literacy and numeracy benchmarks. As all States and Territories had previously agreed to the measurement of literacy performance against the national benchmarks for year 3, it had been expected that this report would contain a reasonably detailed account of the results of the process. While methodological considerations have not allowed this to occur, Ministers have taken steps to enhance the process in future years.

Meeting in Adelaide in April 1999, MCEETYA reaffirmed its commitment to national reporting of student achievement in numeracy, reading, writing and spelling. Ministers committed their States and Territories to work collaboratively to further refine and improve the equating process so as to enable nationally comparable State and Territory reporting in reading, writing and spelling in the 1999 National Report, which will be published in the year 2000.

Vocational education and training

One of the most readily apparent trends in Australian school education is the increasing incidence of vocational education and training (VET) forming a significant part of senior secondary schooling. The trend is apparent in the sharp increase in the number of students enrolled in such programs as well as in the number of industry groups involved.

Furthermore, the pattern is visible in all sectors and among both male and female students.

In its most recent report to MCEETYA, the Taskforce on VET in Schools noted that schools have already begun to change significantly as a result of student demand for VET and the process of offering programs that are directly designed to meet the needs of industry. The Taskforce cautioned, however, that the level of activity and pace of change need to be viewed within the context of a lingering school and community perception that students who traditionally complete 12 years of schooling would be university-bound and the curriculum provided would reflect this.

The Taskforce argued that, if VET in Schools is to provide maximum value for students, it is imperative that VET be accorded full status within senior secondary certificates and that achievement in appropriate VET programs contributes directly towards university entrance as well as to entrance to further training and employment. The Taskforce believes that such a change will require a major transformation in schooling, as schools will need to work closely with industry and increasingly become brokers of VET for their students.

If this is the case, it is likely that the emerging trend will be one of schools arranging VET programs for their students which will be delivered through a mix of modes, including school-based delivery, private and public training providers and on-the-job training. It is also likely that there will be an expansion in the number of students at school engaged in New Apprenticeships.

During 1998, a study was commissioned to compare the cost of providing VET in Schools to that of providing general education. The study concluded that there are additional costs involved in providing VET in Schools and estimated that the additional costs in 1998 amounted to \$64.5 million and it is expected that this will rise to \$119.4 million in the year 2004. The study also identified a further \$30 million of transitional

costs being provided where VET programs are not fully integrated within general education.

Schooling for socioeconomically disadvantaged students

For a long time providers of school education in Australia have been aware that students from some sections of society are less likely than others to participate in, and be successful at, primary and secondary schooling. Students from low socioeconomic families constitute a major example of this phenomenon, and providers have made special provision for this group with a view to lessening the gap between the performance of these students and their more advantaged peers.

Details of the special provision made in 1998 are provided earlier in this report, as are some examples of attempts to measure the relative achievements of this group of students. The question that needs to be answered is whether the achievement gap between these and other students is diminishing, as this will indicate whether or not progress is being made towards the realisation of the national equity goal.

In general terms it is apparent that the question remains unanswered. All the participation and achievement data included in this report reveal major differences between the performance of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and other students. Furthermore, the differences are apparent in the most fundamental aspects of schooling such as attendance, retention and achievement in literacy and numeracy. The combination of low socioeconomic circumstance and other factors that appear to influence achievement is also frequently apparent. For example, boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds are greatly over-represented in low-achieving literacy groups.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were a focus group for the 1993 National Report, but at that time no data were published to indicate the size of the performance gap. It is therefore not feasible to observe the extent of any progress that may have been made in the intervening period. While this report contains a good deal of comparative data, it is not generally in a form that makes it possible to discern any change to the situation over time.

The result is that there is very little evidence to indicate that there has been any improvement. However, this may reflect the inadequacy of the data to detect change more than it reflects the real position. For example, there is evidence from New South Wales that there have been significant improvements in year 3 and 5 literacy levels in recent times and that the improvements have been particularly apparent among low-achieving students. Since students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are known to be over-represented in this group, it can be reasonably concluded that they have been among those showing improvement.

When discussing the policies and programs available at the time, the 1993 National Report commented:

As states and sectors use different definitions of socioeconomic disadvantage, it has not been possible to date to measure educational outcomes of students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in a nationally consistent way nor, therefore, to assess how adequate these policies and programs are for meeting the agreed national goal of promoting equality of educational opportunity for this group of students.

The same comment applies to 1998 and it is clear that considerable progress needs to be made on definitional issues and on the establishment of an appropriate assessment and reporting framework before Australian schools will be in a position to make a credible evaluation of progress in this important area. The newly established National Education Performance Monitoring Taskforce is attempting to resolve these issues.

Indigenous students

In 1998, there were 102,166 full-time Indigenous students enrolled in Australia's schools. The great majority (88 per cent) were enrolled in government schools and a higher than average proportion was attending primary schools (69 per cent compared to the national average of 58.5 per cent).

Indigenous students constituted just under 3.2 per cent of the total enrolment of Australian schools, a slight increase from the 1997 figure of 3.1 per cent. Within the government sector, the proportion of Indigenous students rose to 4.0 per cent in 1998, compared to 3.8 per cent in 1997, while in the non-government sector the proportion remained constant at 1.8 per cent. Approximately 5.3 per cent of Indigenous students were enrolled in years 11 or 12, compared with 12.2 per cent of all Australian students.

All Australian governments have recognised that the country's Indigenous people are the most educationally disadvantaged group in the community. Indigenous people participate less in, and attain significantly lower levels in, education than the rest of the Australian population. For this reason, all States and Territories and the Commonwealth have agreed to work together in a concerted effort to improve the situation. The Commonwealth is providing supplementary funding through the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP). All government school systems and other education providers in receipt of IESIP funding have agreed to monitor and report annually on their progress in achieving improved educational outcomes for Indigenous students using agreed performance indicators. Baseline data and targets for improvement were previously established and 1998 was the second year in which education providers reported on their Indigenous education outcomes against these performance indicators and annual targets.

A summary of the progress made is provided earlier in this report. Information collected over time will become

increasingly useful as long-term trends become apparent. In the meantime, changes that appear to have been made over the first two reporting years should be treated with some caution. Nevertheless, it is possible to make three general observations when 1998 results are compared to 1997:

- There was a significant improvement in the retention of Indigenous students nationally into years 11 and 12.
- There was no improvement in the attendance of Indigenous students.
- While there was slight improvement in some literacy and numeracy measures, there was no consistent pattern of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student achievement in this area.

Data relating to access, participation and outcomes for Indigenous students reveal that they remain the most educationally disadvantaged group within the community. The monitoring and reporting regime that is now in place will enable providers of schooling to measure whether the current strategies that are in place to alter this situation are effective.