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Overseas students in Australian higher education: a quick guide

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The [latest figures](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show that, in 2017–18, international education was worth \$32.4 billion to the Australian economy, up from \$28.1 billion in 2016–17. [Recent research](#) for the Department of Education (DoE) shows Australia also gains social, cultural and skilled workforce benefits from international education.

This quick guide provides an overview of key information related to overseas students in Australian higher education. Higher education accounted for 68.5 per cent (\$22.2 billion) of international education [export income](#) in 2017–18, and [45.6 per cent](#) of all overseas student enrolments in 2018.¹ Overseas students also enrol in Australian vocational education and training (VET), schools, English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS), and non-award courses. However, each of these accounts for fewer students and has less economic impact than overseas student enrolments in higher education.

While people studying in Australia on a student visa are often referred to as ‘international students’, this quick guide uses the terminology of ‘overseas students’, which is more commonly used in the Australian Government’s [Education](#) and [Home Affairs](#) portfolios, which have responsibility for policy and programs related to overseas students.

Except where otherwise indicated, the information provided in this quick guide relates to the entire higher education sector. [Registered higher education](#) providers are public and private universities, as well as for-profit and not-for-profit non-university providers, including public institutions such as TAFEs.

Some non-Australian citizens, such as New Zealand citizens, permanent residents, and permanent humanitarian visa holders are not considered overseas students for the purposes of [higher education support](#).

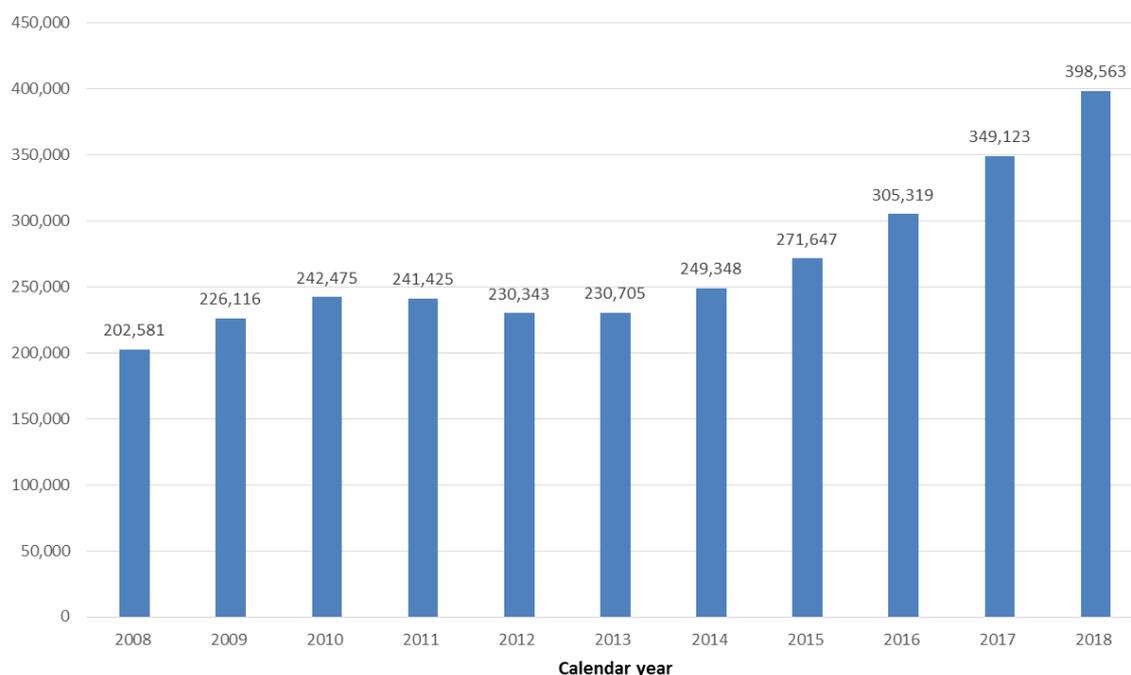
1. Export income figure is from Parliamentary Library calculations based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), [International Trade: Supplementary Information, Financial Year, 2017-18](#), cat. no. 5368.0.55.003, Table 9.1, ABS, Canberra, 2018.

Enrolments

Overseas student statistics are available from the DoE's [international student data webpage](#). The latest full-year data is for 2018. As shown in Figure 1 below, there were 398,563 higher education enrolments by people in Australia on student visas.

Enrolments include new and continuing students. Enrolment figures can [double count students](#) who complete one course of study and enrol in another within given period. For example, a student may complete an ELICOS course and then enrol in a bachelor degree, and have both enrolments counted in the same year.

Figure 1: higher education enrolments, overseas students, 2008–2018



Source: DoE, [Basic pivot table 2015–2019](#), December 2018.

Enrolments by state and territory

In 2018, overseas student enrolments in higher education institutions in Australia were largely concentrated in NSW and Victoria.

Table 1: higher education enrolments, overseas students, state and territory, 2018

State/territory	Enrolments	% of total
NSW	143,585	36.0
VIC	140,807	35.3
QLD	51,003	12.8
SA	20,722	5.2
WA	22,136	5.6
TAS	5,869	1.5
NT	1,540	0.4
ACT	12,901	3.2
Total	398,563	100.0

Source: DoE, [Basic pivot table 2015–2019](#), December 2018.

Enrolments by nationality

Of overseas student enrolments in 2018, 38.3 per cent (152,591) were from China, and 18.0 per cent (71,857) were from India, with the remaining top ten nationalities being Nepal, Vietnam, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

Table 2: higher education enrolments, overseas (os) students, state and territory, top ten nationalities, 2018

Nationality	NSW	Vic.	QLD	SA	WA	Tas.	NT	ACT	Total	% of all OS
China	58,510	50,878	17,686	8,701	5,328	2,762	188	8,538	152,591	38.3
India	20,512	33,696	8,705	3,287	3,949	601	282	825	71,857	18.0
Nepal	19,306	4,720	2,141	776	703	121	378	88	28,233	7.1
Vietnam	5,462	6,617	1,452	880	792	232	75	208	15,718	3.9
Malaysia	2,243	6,041	1,794	1,237	1,781	576	19	297	13,988	3.5
Pakistan	4,709	4,351	769	320	921	105	55	167	11,397	2.9
Indonesia	3,153	4,692	754	216	671	30	35	324	9,875	2.5
Sri Lanka	981	6,599	691	249	413	95	37	144	9,209	2.3
Hong Kong	2,721	2,142	1,872	1,095	712	128	14	247	8,931	2.2
Singapore	1,368	2,454	1,291	537	1,215	265	1	197	7,328	1.8
Other	24,620	18,617	13,848	3,424	5,651	954	456	1,866	69,436	17.4
All OS	143,585	140,807	51,003	20,722	22,136	5,869	1,540	12,901	398,563	100.0

Source: DoE, [Basic pivot table 2015–2019](#), December 2018.

Overseas share of higher education enrolments

DoE's [higher education statistics](#) provide a breakdown of overseas student enrolments at Australian higher education institutions, and allow comparison of overseas and domestic enrolments. The latest full-year for this data is 2017. Table 3 below shows total higher education enrolments for both overseas students and domestic students from 2008 to 2017. A breakdown by institution is at Appendix 1.

Table 3: higher education enrolments, domestic and overseas students, 2008–2017

	OS students (temporary entry visas)	Other OS students ^(a)	Domestic students	Total	OS students (temporary entry visas), % of all OS higher education enrolments
2008	207,100	87,063	771,932	1,066,095	19.4
2009	231,167	89,803	813,896	1,134,866	20.4
2010	245,737	89,536	857,384	1,192,657	20.6
2011	242,903	89,674	888,431	1,221,008	19.9
2012	232,867	90,745	934,110	1,257,722	18.5
2013	236,332	92,070	985,374	1,313,776	18.0
2014	254,383	93,177	1,025,670	1,373,230	18.5
2015	273,817	89,481	1,046,835	1,410,133	19.4
2016	304,957	86,179	1,066,073	1,457,209	20.9
2017	345,686	85,752	1,081,945	1,513,383	22.8

Source: DoE, [‘Student data’](#), DoE website, all students data tables, various years, and Parliamentary Library calculations.

(a) ‘Other overseas students’ includes those students who are not domestic students, and who are residing outside Australia during the unit of study/time of application. Students studying in Australia on student visas make up the bulk of the enrolments shown in the ‘temporary entry visas’ column. Further information about the citizenship classifications is available via DoE, [HEIMSHelp](#).

Visa arrangements

Types of overseas student visas

Recent [changes](#) have reduced the number of student visas from seven to one, the [Student \(subclass 500\) visa](#). Instead of distinct visas for different types of overseas students, there are now seven streams within the one visa: higher education; post-graduate research, VET, schools, independent ELICOS, foreign affairs or defence, and non-award. There is also a distinct [student guardian visa](#), but these students are outside the scope of this quick guide.

International students studying in the higher education sector are predominantly granted student visas under the higher education and postgraduate research streams (see Tables 4 and 5 below).

Visa processing

The Department of Home Affairs (DHA) assesses and grants student visa applications. However, under the DHA's [Simplified Student Visa Framework](#) (the Framework), higher education providers also have a role, with the intention of reducing duplication and streamlining the process.

Two key areas where higher education providers have a role are in confirming English language proficiency and assessing the financial capacity of students to live in Australia. Depending on the higher education provider and the student's country of origin, these requirements may not be further assessed by DHA. While the DHA retains the ability to assess any requirement for a student visa, the Framework does not mandate this.

Visa grants

Overseas student visa statistics are available from DHA, via the data.gov.au portal under [Student visa program](#). The most recent full-year data is for 2018. The data show the number of visas granted, which is distinct from the number of overseas students as one overseas student may be granted more than one visa in a period of time, depending on their circumstance.

As shown in Table 4 below, there were 188,567 primary student visas granted in 2018 for the higher education and postgraduate research streams. 'Primary' refers to the person who holds the visa for the original purpose while 'secondary' refers to any spouses and/or dependent children.

Table 4 also shows the growth in primary student visas granted in the higher education stream from around 2011 to 2018, after a period of sustained downturn [between 2008 and 2011](#).

Table 4: primary student visas granted—higher education and postgraduate research streams, 2008–2018

	Primary student visas granted	Growth rate
2008	126,470	14%
2009	119,570	-5%
2010	108,507	-9%
2011	104,277	-4%
2012	110,978	6%
2013	128,964	16%
2014	146,128	13%
2015	138,334	-5%
2016	152,017	10%
2017	168,149	11%
2018	188,567	12%

Source: DHA, '[Student visa program](#)', February 2019, data.gov.au

Note: these figures include the higher education and postgraduate research streams of the student (subclass 500) visa.

When using visa statistics, including student visa statistics, the number of visas granted should not be used as a proxy for the number of people migrating to Australia. This is because a significant proportion of higher education overseas student visas are granted to people who are already in Australia, as shown in Table 5 below. Students gain visas in Australia for a variety of reasons, including moving from one mode of education to another, or transitioning from a different category of temporary visa to a student visa.

Table 5: primary student visas granted in Australia—higher education and postgraduate research streams, 2008–2018

	Primary student visas granted in Australia	Proportion of total primary student visas granted
2008	38,269	30%
2009	42,365	35%
2010	49,673	46%
2011	52,715	51%
2012	50,939	46%
2013	49,707	39%
2014	47,292	32%
2015	42,486	31%
2016	44,158	29%
2017	49,871	30%
2018	61,590	33%

Source: DHA, '[Student visa program](#)', February 2019, data.gov.au

Note: these figures include the higher education and postgraduate research streams of the student (subclass 500) visa.

Table 5 also shows primary student visas granted to people already in Australia over the past decade. The share of student visas granted in Australia as a proportion of the total has been relatively stable at about one-third, except from 2009 to 2013. Due in part to immigration [policy changes](#), the proportion of primary student visas granted in Australia grew from 2008 to 2011 and then declined.

Eligibility

Under the [Migration Regulations 1994](#), in order to be granted a student visa, applicants must:

- be enrolled full-time in an [approved Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students](#) (CRICOS) course (that is, a course approved to be offered to overseas students) [section 500.211]
- have sufficient money to support living in Australia (section 500.214)
- have adequate health insurance (section 500.215)
- be a 'genuine temporary entrant' with the intention to return home after studying (section 500.212) and
- meet English language requirements (section 500.213).

Full-time study

An overseas student cannot undertake part-time study. A full-time course of study is required and this is linked to the length of each student visa. In most instances, this means overseas students are unable to vary their course load (medical and other exceptions are available).

English language requirements

In practice, English language requirements for overseas students are subject to two thresholds:

- the Australian Government sets a minimum test score for overseas student visas—the Legislative Instrument, [Migration \(IMMI 18/015: English Language Tests and Evidence Exemptions for Subclass 500 \(student\) visa\) Instrument 2018](#), requires:
 - a minimum [International English Language Testing System](#) (IELTS) score of 5.5 ([out of 9](#)) or
 - a minimum IELTS score of 5.0 paired with 10 weeks of ELICOS or
 - a minimum IELTS score of 4.5 paired with 20 weeks of ELICOS.
- higher education providers also include their own English language proficiency requirements as part of entry requirements, which can be higher than the minimum entry score prescribed by the Australian Government.

IELTS is a widely used English language proficiency testing system. Four other types of proficiency tests are available for [visa applicants](#), with equivalent minimum test scores.

Work rights

While the purpose of the overseas student visa program is study, rather than employment, people on student visas do have [work rights](#). Currently, they may work up to 40 hours per fortnight when their course is in session (that is, during term time) and unlimited hours in holiday periods.

Tuition fees

Under the [Higher Education Support Act 2003](#), the [Higher Education Provider Guidelines 2012](#) (the Guidelines) specify (subject to some exceptions):

- fees charged to overseas students must be sufficient to recover the full cost of providing the course to the student and
- the fee cannot be less than the relevant domestic student fee, unless the course is fully offshore or permission for the lower fee is granted by the responsible department (currently DoE).

The Guidelines do not set an upper limit for overseas student fees.

According to the Australian Government's [Study Australia webpage](#), Australian higher education providers charge on average \$15,000 to \$33,000 for an undergraduate bachelor degree and \$20,000 to \$37,000 for a postgraduate Masters degree. (These figures do not include high-cost courses such as veterinary and medical degrees.)

Overseas student fees as a proportion of university revenue

For Australian universities, overseas student fees have been the largest source of revenue growth in recent years.

As shown in Table 6 below, revenue from overseas student fees has grown as a proportion of total revenue, from 15.5 per cent in 2008 to 23.3 per cent in 2017 (latest year available). The

\$1,208 million increase in revenue from overseas students from 2016 to 2017 accounted for 64.2 per cent of the total increase in all revenue for the same period (\$1,881 million).

Table 6: Australian university revenue from fee paying overseas students, 2008–2017

	Total revenue from all operations (\$'000)	Change from previous year	Revenue from fee paying overseas students (\$'000)	Change from previous year	Percentage of revenue from fee paying OS students
2008	\$18,955,909		\$2,946,127		15.5%
2009	\$20,468,862	8.0%	\$3,414,687	15.9%	16.7%
2010	\$22,158,466	8.3%	\$3,881,656	13.7%	17.5%
2011	\$23,658,742	6.8%	\$4,124,064	6.2%	17.4%
2012	\$25,210,033	6.6%	\$4,134,768	0.3%	16.4%
2013	\$26,332,964	4.5%	\$4,290,808	3.8%	16.3%
2014	\$27,751,858	5.4%	\$4,741,973	10.5%	17.1%
2015	\$28,609,979	3.1%	\$5,349,879	12.8%	18.7%
2016	\$30,147,079	5.4%	\$6,249,049	16.8%	20.7%
2017	\$32,028,091	6.2%	\$7,457,002	19.3%	23.3%

Source: DoE, [Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers](#), various years, and Parliamentary Library calculations.

Legislative protections for overseas students in Australia

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)

Under the [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011](#), all higher education providers must meet the [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2015](#) as a minimum condition of registration. Under the Threshold Standards, all institutions that offer higher education to students in Australia on a student visa are required to provide support services, including initial orientation and academic support.

The Education Services for Overseas Students legislative framework

In addition to the requirements of the Threshold Standards, the [Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000](#) and [related legislation](#), including the [National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018 \(National Code\)](#), make specific provision for the protection of overseas students studying with Australian providers in any education sector.

In the higher education sector, these arrangements are primarily enforced by the [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency](#) (TEQSA), which also enforces the Threshold Standards.

Student satisfaction

DoE conducts an international student survey every two years, the latest being the [2018 International Student Survey](#). For overseas higher education students in Australia, compared with the [2016 International Student Survey](#):

- 89 per cent are satisfied with their overall study experience (stable compared with 2016)
- 91 per cent are satisfied with the quality of support provided (up from 89 per cent in 2016)
- 88 per cent are satisfied with the overall learning environment (up from 87 per cent in 2016)
- 92 per cent are satisfied with the expertise of lecturers (down from 93 per cent in 2016) and
- 94 per cent are satisfied with the safety of living in Australia (up from 90 per cent in 2016).

Student achievement

Attrition rates

The DoE's [higher education statistics collection](#) includes attrition ('drop out') data by citizenship status. For overseas students, the attrition rate increased from 8.9 per cent in 2008 to 9.4 per cent in 2016, while for domestic students the increase was from 12.6 per cent to 15 per cent in 2015, before declining to 14.3 per cent in 2016.

Table 7: domestic and overseas bachelor university student attrition rates 2008–2016, per cent

	OS student attrition rate	Domestic student attrition rate
2008	8.9	12.6
2009	8.3	12.3
2010	8.3	12.9
2011	8.9	12.7
2012	8.9	13.3
2013	8.4	14.7
2014	8.7	15.0
2015	9.3	15.0
2016	9.4	14.3

Source: DoE, [Selected higher education statistics – 2017 student data](#).

Note: the best available attrition measures for domestic and overseas students differ. **The domestic student attrition rate used in Table 6 is the 'new adjusted attrition rate'**, which uses student ID and the [Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number](#) (CHESSN) to track students within and between institutions, so a student is not counted in the attrition figures if they move to another institution. **The overseas student attrition rate used in Table 6 is the 'new normal attrition rate'**, which is based on student ID only (overseas students do not have a CHESSN). This means overseas students who move to another institution are counted in the attrition figures, leading likely to over-estimates of attrition among overseas students in the Table 7.

Post-study visa pathways

There is no automatic pathway from a student visa to a permanent residency visa in Australia.

However, overseas students can transition to various types of permanent residency visas if they meet the relevant eligibility criteria. A joint [Treasury and Department of Home Affairs report](#) published in 2018 found that, of 1.6 million overseas students (from all education sectors) granted a visa between 2000–01 and 2013–14, 16 per cent transitioned to a permanent residency visa at some stage after arriving in Australia.

Table 8 below shows 13,138 permanent residency visas were granted to people holding an international student visa in Australia in 2017–18, the lowest figure in a decade.

Table 8: permanent residency visas granted to former international students in Australia, 2008–09 to 2017–18

	Total permanent residency visas granted	Skilled	Partner	Other
2008–09	20,141	15,878	4,087	176
2009–10	13,286	8,143	4,919	224
2010–11	29,755	24,450	5,172	133

2011–12	28,473	21,558	6,689	226
2012–13	30,170	21,714	8,011	445
2013–14	18,100	10,591	7,179	330
2014–15	17,638	10,006	7,173	459
2015–16	18,251	11,912	5,804	535
2016–17	17,102	9,451	7,118	533
2017–18	13,138	7,139	5,619	380

Source: DHA, [Australian Migration Statistics, 2017–18](#), data.gov.au

Note: these statistics are only available for financial years. Also note the title for this table is drawn directly for the sourced material from the Department of Home Affairs.

However, international students who transition to another temporary visa, before gaining a permanent residency visa, are not included in the departmental data above. Given the increasing number of [Temporary Graduate visas](#) (Table 9 below), it is likely more people are transitioning from a student visa to a different category of temporary visa and then gaining a permanent residency visa. There is no publicly available data on this group of people.

A Temporary Graduate visa allows a migrant to live, study and work in Australia after completing their study. Only people who hold a student visa are eligible for the various streams of the Temporary Graduate visa.

Table 9: Temporary Graduate visas granted, 2008–2018

	Total Temporary Graduate visas granted	Graduate Work	Post-Study Work	Skilled Graduate
2008	4,056	0	0	4,056
2009	20,025	0	0	20,025
2010	24,575	0	0	24,575
2011	27,736	0	0	27,736
2012	43,879	0	0	43,879
2013	25,657	5,184	32	20,441
2014	21,147	16,423	3,751	973
2015	25,624	13,345	12,203	76
2016	37,472	11,454	25,999	19
2017	46,340	8,752	37,580	8
2018	54,932	8,452	46,478	2

Source: DHA, '[Temporary Graduate visa program](#)', April 2019, data.gov.au

Further information

There is a range of additional research and information available via the DoE's international education website, including [research papers](#), [data visualisations](#) showing student origins, locations and pathways, data on the [offshore delivery of Australian courses](#), and [Australian students studying overseas](#).

See also:

- Department of Home Affairs, [Student visa and Temporary Graduate visa program reports](#).
- Spinks, H, [Overseas students: immigration policy changes 1997–2015](#), Parliamentary Library, Research paper series, 2015–16, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2016.

Appendix 1. All higher education students by state and territory, higher education institution, citizenship and residence status, 2017

State and institution	Domestic students			Overseas students		TOTAL
	Australian citizen	New Zealand citizen	Other domestic	Temporary entry permit	Other overseas	
New South Wales						
Charles Sturt University	32,754	307	587	8,942	1,569	44,159
Macquarie University	31,814	333	1,218	11,365	292	45,022
Southern Cross University	13,148	170	234	2,696	602	16,850
The University of New England	21,746	160	393	1,026	155	23,480
The University of Newcastle	28,180	173	599	4,010	1,388	34,350
The University of Sydney	38,494	819	2,149	22,564	418	64,444
University of New South Wales	36,957	np	2,114	20,196	np	59,782
University of Technology Sydney	28,928	216	1,450	13,442	846	44,882
University of Wollongong	18,946	101	408	7,652	7,340	34,447
Western Sydney University	36,790	355	1,660	5,569	372	44,746
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	33,260	407	720	15,174	4,033	53,594
Victoria						
Deakin University	42,885	424	1,150	11,170	478	56,107
Federation University Australia	8,238	61	231	3,818	1,374	13,722
La Trobe University	28,470	281	728	7,535	1,625	38,639
Monash University	42,103	625	1,966	22,058	11,505	78,257
RMIT University	33,960	457	1,785	14,495	14,841	65,538
Swinburne University of Technology	30,702	290	912	5,610	3,926	41,440
The University of Melbourne	37,771	1,002	2,628	23,680	176	65,257
University of Divinity	1,347	25	49	124	24	1,569
Victoria University	15,663	239	900	5,117	4,749	26,668
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	6,351	46	259	24,039	707	31,402
Queensland						

Bond University	2,906	68	111	2,813	273	6,171
CQUniversity	16,440	187	372	6,187	29	23,215
Griffith University	36,850	908	1,203	7,495	804	47,260
James Cook University	14,335	173	404	3,041	2,874	20,827
Queensland University of Technology	39,636	642	1,194	8,315	43	49,830
The University of Queensland	34,690	680	1,530	15,365	66	52,331
University of Southern Queensland	21,831	353	705	2,341	918	26,148
University of the Sunshine Coast	12,736	217	226	3,205	101	16,485
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	7,398	np	67	2,064	< 5	9,697
Western Australia						
Curtin University	32,935	403	1,862	6,708	7,002	48,910
Edith Cowan University	22,554	365	1,024	4,777	734	29,454
Murdoch University	13,832	224	672	1,842	6,657	23,227
The University of Notre Dame Australia	11,332	129	235	216	0	11,912
The University of Western Australia	18,310	238	1,213	5,066	432	25,259
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	1,494	16	107	1,863	1,315	4,795
South Australia						
Flinders University	19,667	92	792	3,160	1,558	25,269
The University of Adelaide	18,305	123	819	7,233	331	26,811
Torrens University Australia	5,219	17	10	3,697	202	9,145
University of South Australia	24,419	100	1,168	5,068	331	31,086
Private Universities (Table C) and Non-University Higher Education Institutions	5,442	92	368	2,508	2,805	11,215
Tasmania						
University of Tasmania	28,985	336	1,840	5,039	1,448	37,648
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	0	0	0	0	0	0
Northern Territory						
Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education	18	0	0	0	0	18
Charles Darwin University	8,433	114	655	2,212	18	11,432
Australian Capital Territory						
The Australian National University	15,218	288	776	8,671	402	25,355

University of Canberra	12,926	96	404	2,614	711	16,751
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	926	10	65	8	0	1,009
Multi-State						
Australian Catholic University	29,401	254	631	3,783	248	34,317
Non-University Higher Education Institutions	3,162	38	115	113	23	3,451
TOTAL	1,027,907	13,330	40,708	345,686	85,752	1,513,383

Source: DoE, '[2017 Section 2 All students](#)', DoE website, September 2018.

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