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# Tracking Australian students' participation in senior secondary geography: Trends and implications for geography's future

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## Abstract

This study examines trends in senior secondary geography participation in Australia from 1998 to 2023, using data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and published senior secondary data. The research reveals a significant decline in geography enrolment nationally, with the proportion of Year 12 students studying geography falling from 8.1% (1998–2017) to 6.2% (2012–2023). Substantial variations exist across jurisdictions, with Western Australia maintaining the highest participation rates and the Australian Capital Territory the lowest. The study also explores demographic characteristics, finding that independent schools have higher participation rates, and gender balance varies by state. The decline in geography enrolment is contextualised within broader educational trends and compared with selected international patterns. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these trends for the future of geography education in Australia, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address the subject's declining popularity and ensure its continued relevance in the curriculum.

## KEYWORDS

Australia, geography education, school geography, senior secondary, student enrolment trends

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Geography is currently included in the primary and secondary school curriculum throughout Australia. Whilst it has a confirmed place in the curriculum as a compulsory subject up to Year 8, 9, or 10, depending on the jurisdiction, its enrolment is low and declining in the senior secondary years. The five states and two territories offer a choice of senior level subjects from which students may select options, of which only an English course is compulsory. Senior geography is one option amongst a substantial list of subjects that students may select. The trend of declining senior secondary geography enrolments in Australia is not new. Reporting on the trend of enrolments in five states (Queensland, New South

Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia) from 1973 to 2017, Maude (2019) noted that whereas in 1973, 22% to 50.3% of Year 12 students in each state took geography, by 2017, these figures had plummeted to 2.1% to 8.1%. In-depth investigations into senior secondary geography enrolments in each state and territory were last published in a special issue of *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* in 2006. In a recent issue of *Geographical Research*, Hay (2025) noted that geography is facing “diminished public appreciation ... and substantive elimination from university programs” (p.1) and that against this backdrop is the “lamentable situation” (p.3) in South Australia where Year 12 enrolment of geography has fallen from 2.7% in 2012 to 1.4% in 2023. Are the other states and

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territories in similarly lamentable situations? What else could we learn from historical trends that might inform the future of senior geography participation?

This paper adopts a novel approach to interrogate the longitudinal patterns in senior geography participation in Australia by examining two datasets in turn—first, the Australian Government's Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth for the 'historic' period of 1998 to 2017, and second, published senior secondary data by Australian jurisdictions for the 'recent' period of 2012 to 2023. Our research questions are as follows:

- What are the national trends in senior secondary geography participation and demographic characteristics of this participation between 1998 and 2017?
- What are the recent trends in senior secondary geography participation for each state and territory between 2012 and 2023?
- Taken together, what do these data suggest about the future of senior secondary geography in Australia? What are the implications for research and policy?

This study is also novel in that it casts its gaze beyond the shores of Australia in its literature review. In Section 2, we first review research on Australian secondary geography enrolments; this is followed by an examination of studies on senior geography enrolment trends in selected international jurisdictions to contextualise the issue within the broader school geography education landscape. Following the literature review, Section 3 explains our data sources and analysis methods. Section 4 details the data and analyses. Section 5 draws together our findings, discusses the implications, and makes recommendations.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 | The Australian context

Concerns about the diminishing position of secondary school geography in Australia have been ongoing for decades. Declining senior geography enrolments were spotlighted in a special issue of *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* in 2006. Researchers in Victoria (Kriewaldt, 2006), Tasmania (Robertson & Doyle, 2006), South Australia (McInerney & Shepherd, 2006), New South Wales (Bliss, 2006), the Australian Capital Territory (Freeman, 2006), and the Northern Territory (Battalis & Boland, 2006) all identified a decline in senior secondary geography enrolments over a 10- to 15-year time period. Year 11 and 12 geography enrolments in New South Wales declined from 14.9% of students in 1996 to 6.7% of students in 2004 (Bliss, 2006). Tasmania's Year 12 geography enrolments almost halved between 1992 and 2004, declining from 551 to 285 students (Robertson &

### Key Insights

The study reveals a concerning decline in senior secondary geography participation across Australia, with significant variations between jurisdictions. This trend reflects broader challenges in geography education, including changes in curriculum structure and emphasis, geography teacher shortages, and public perceptions of the subject's relevance. The research highlights the need for targeted strategies to revitalise geography education, such as improving teacher education and promoting an understanding of the subject's career prospects. The findings also underscore the importance of regular monitoring and analysis of enrolment data to inform policy decisions.

Doyle, 2006). Between 1996 and 2004, Year 12 enrolments in South Australia declined from 2243 students to 1466 students (McInerney & Shepherd, 2006). Amongst other factors, researchers attributed the key reasons for the decline in these states to a lack of teacher training and competition with other subjects (Battalis & Boland, 2006; Freeman, 2006; McInerney & Shepherd, 2006). The state of Victoria also saw a decline in senior secondary geography enrolments, with student numbers dropping from 4093 in 1992 to 2687 in 2006 (Kriewaldt, 2006). Similar to the situation in the Northern Territory, Australian Capital Territory, and South Australia, this decline was primarily linked to an increase in the pool of subjects offered to students during their senior years (Kriewaldt, 2006). Queensland was the only state to report a stabilising enrolment at that time, despite the addition of new and more vocational senior secondary subjects in many schools (Smerdon, 2006). This was significant as Ballantyne (1996) previously found that senior secondary enrolments in Queensland were declining. The arrest of this decline by 2006 was associated with an updated geography curriculum and increased use of spatial technologies in the classroom (Smerdon, 2006).

Scholars link geography's decline to the introduction of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) from the late 1980s, which saw geography classified under the umbrella term SOSE, alongside history, civics, and economics, thus eroding its disciplinary identity (Casinader, 2015; Maude, 2014). With the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, geography regained its disciplinary identity as a separate subject in secondary schools. However, geography was again subsumed into a broader category. Echoing the move to the umbrella term SOSE, the national curriculum authority reconceived the turn to disciplines, creating a new umbrella term—Humanities or Humanities and Social

Sciences (HASS) in the Australian Curriculum. HASS comprises four fields, each with distinctive disciplines: Geography, History, Civics and Citizenship, and Business and Economics. This change in nomenclature has had a pervasive effect as states and territories have adopted the Australian Curriculum. Victoria and New South Wales have adapted it for their jurisdictions, diminishing the emphasis on the discipline of geography (Kriewaldt & Lee, 2022; Casinader, 2016). All jurisdictions now use the term HASS except Victoria, which refers to this area as the Humanities, and New South Wales, which uses the term Human Society and its Environment (HSIE). Changes in curriculum nomenclature may contribute to reduced enrolments in geography in senior years as students have a diminished conception of the unique features of the discipline, and there are fewer well qualified senior geography teachers with more graduates of generalist Humanities/HSIE/HASS or SOSE teachers, in which the depth of study of how to teach geography was only a small component of their teacher education program.

The learning area continues to face challenges. Teachers report an emphasis on the subject of history in junior secondary years, combined with a diminishing proportion of geography-trained teachers and a lack of interest and advocacy from learning area leaders, as barriers to delivering quality geography education in their schools (Casinader, 2016). Indeed, geography has a distinctly high proportion of out-of-field geography teachers, and this has implications on instructional quality, student engagement and achievement, and importantly, teacher identity and the pipeline of future geography teachers (Kriewaldt & Lee, 2022; Caldis, 2017; Caldis & Kleeman, 2019; Hay, 2025). Broader societal factors, including persistent public misconceptions of geography as a subject about maps and capitals and with few apparent career prospects, and renaming geography in higher education and subsuming it under faculties like Science and Environment, have also contributed to the “parlous state” of geography in Australia (Hay, 2025).

## 2.2 | Selected international trends—England, Scotland, USA, South Korea, and Singapore

Is there a similar trend in other international jurisdictions? To answer this question, we selected and sampled studies from specific jurisdictions. We have chosen jurisdictions from different continents (Europe, North America, and Asia) with published findings on senior geography enrolments. Amongst the jurisdictions selected, England is the only one with organisations that regularly publish analyses of annual secondary geography enrolment data; the other jurisdictions have sporadic publications.

England is a jurisdiction which has a strong tradition of a vibrant school geography curriculum and an active research community. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and Geographical Association (GA) are the key bodies who regularly track and analyse data on school geography enrolment in England, often including data from Wales and Northern Ireland. These organisations reported a rising trend in A level geography enrolment up until 2023. Between 2022 and 2023, there was a 2.19% increase in the number of A-level geography students in the UK (England, Wales, and Northern Ireland), reaching 38,264 entries (RGS, 2023). This represented 4.4% of total A level entries in 2023, making it the 12th most popular A level subject (GA, 2024). Part of this strong uptake is perhaps because of the high geography enrolments at GCSE (middle secondary). Looking solely at data from England, geography was the sixth most popular GCSE subject in 2023, with an increasing number of BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and disadvantaged students enrolling in GCSE geography (RGS, n.d.). The same report noted that A level geography remains dominated by White students, with proportionately underrepresented BAME intake for geography being similar at university level (RGS, n.d.). There is a concern that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are underrepresented in geography at elite universities, such as the University of Oxford (Bennett, 2018).

Similar concerns are reported in Scotland, where there are more geography learners in school from less deprived backgrounds over time. Scotland experienced a decline in the number of senior students studying geography between 2016 and 2019; however, the academic year ending in 2020 saw this trend reversed (Selmes et al., 2022). The authors attributed the decline in popularity of geography at school level to the range of subjects offered in school and a decline in political interest in geography. Notably, Scotland has also been facing an increase in out-of-field teaching in geography, as well as a perception that it is harder to achieve high grades in public examinations in geography than in other subjects.

The USA has also seen an increase in students completing senior secondary geography (Advanced Placement Human Geography [APHG]) between 2001 and 2020, fuelled by a rise in ninth-grade students enrolling in the program (Solem et al., 2024). With two thirds of all students enrolled in APHG being ninth-graders, Solem et al. (2024) argue that rather than supporting geographical education in the United States, this trend is instead hindering geographical knowledge as ninth graders are unlikely to be able to access the more advanced content of APHG. This trend was also noted in research by Lanegran and Zeigler (2016), which considered the issues that could affect future enrolments in APHG. Another challenge associated with younger students enrolling in APHG is that the

content does not align with the skillset of ninth graders, leading to disengagement in the subject and further fuelling the decline in student numbers in higher education (Guida et al., 2024). Declining student numbers in higher education has also caused Jones and Luna (2019) to suggest the term “geography deserts” in many states across the United States, particularly noting that California was home to approximately 12% of the population of the United States in 2016, but only ranked 25th for the number of APHG exams completed in 2015. A state that has bucked the trend is Louisiana, which has seen an increase of 49.8% in enrolment of geography students from 2014 to 2015, likely resulting from a review of the national geography curriculum and subsequent implementation of specific geography standards (Rohli & Binford, 2016).

Curriculum reforms have been associated with changes in the number of students selecting geography in South Korea (Lee & Butt, 2014) and Singapore (Chang, 2014). Geography is taught as part of the social studies curriculum in South Korea, with Lee and Butt (2014) indicating that this has led to a decline in senior secondary students selecting the subject. They also show concern that the subject is at risk of being dismantled only to include a very select range of geographical concepts (Lee & Butt, 2014). Chang (2014) also noted a decline in student numbers in secondary geography in Singapore and attributed this to changes in curriculum resulting in a condensed secondary geography curriculum and teachers having to adapt to the new curriculum within a short period of time (Chang, 2014). There have been no updated reports on secondary geography enrolment trends in these jurisdictions since 2014.

### 3 | METHOD

This paper uses two main data sources to examine patterns in senior school geography participation. Data collected by the Australian Government for the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) study were used for the ‘historic’ period of 1998 to 2017. Published senior secondary data by Australian jurisdictions were used for the ‘recent’ period of 2012 to 2023.

#### 3.1 | Collation of historic year 12 participation data

This paper uses unit record data from the LSAY, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (DE&T) and managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Australian Government, DE&T, or NCVER.

The LSAY track young people as they move from school into further study, work, and other destinations. Participants are asked about their schooling, aspirations, and life satisfaction, as well as their vocational and further education, and employment or job seeking status. Survey participants enter the study when they are about 15 years old and are contacted annually until they are 25. LSAY participants are asked to provide demographic information as well as detail the school subjects they study during their final 2 years of secondary schooling. Groups of survey participants are collectively known as a ‘cohort’ and nationally representative samples of over 10,000 young people begin in each cohort, with those from 2003 onwards recruited from schools that took part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The LSAY cohorts commenced in 1995 (Y95 cohort), 1998 (Y98), 2003 (Y03), 2006 (Y06), 2009 (Y09), and most recently in 2015 (Y15). All cohorts are now in post-schooling life stages.

Data for the Y95, Y98, Y03, Y06, Y09, and Y15 cohorts were obtained from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (Table 1). The data were filtered to capture demographic information, focus on years when the cohorts were undertaking their final years of secondary schooling, and to exclude participants who were no longer at school by that time (Table 1). The Y98 cohort was excluded from our analysis because of issues with the specification of school subjects. For the remaining cohorts, we focussed on whether the participant undertook geography in Year 11 and/or Year 12. Our analysis estimated national data by totalling numbers for all respondents. The proportion of the cohort studying geography was calculated by dividing the number of students studying geography by the total cohort completing Year 12. All results using the LSAY data are reported in terms of the percentage of the school cohort.

#### 3.2 | Collation of recent year 12 participation data

Data from 2012 to 2023 on student participation in Year 12 geography and the total year 12 cohort completing the relevant certificate were collated from published senior secondary data for each jurisdiction (Table 2). Available national data published by ACARA reported the number of students studying in the learning area of Society and Environment, which comprises a group of subjects as a percentage of the total Australian year 12 cohort, rather than subject-specific data. Our analysis thus estimated national data by totalling the numbers from each jurisdiction. The proportion of the cohort studying geography was calculated by dividing the number of students studying geography by the total cohort completing year 12. Participation data for the final unit in a year 12 geography sequence were used for those jurisdictions that reported each unit separately.

**TABLE 1** Summary information about the LSAY cohorts examined in this paper.

LSAY cohort	Year when most completed year 12	Number at school in year 12	Location of data
Y95	1998	7659	Australian Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2017, 'Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 1995 cohort (Version 3.0)', <a href="https://doi.org/10.4225/87/YKOFAL">https://doi.org/10.4225/87/YKOFAL</a> , ADA Dataverse, V3
Y03	2005	6430	Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2017, 'Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2003 cohort (Version 7.1)', <a href="https://doi.org/10.4225/87/5IOBPG">https://doi.org/10.4225/87/5IOBPG</a> , ADA Dataverse, V4
Y06	2008	6890	Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2017, 'Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2006 cohort (Version 10.1)', <a href="https://doi.org/10.4225/87/WFEYRU">https://doi.org/10.4225/87/WFEYRU</a> , ADA Dataverse, V6
Y09	2011	6730	Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2017, 'Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2009 cohort (Version 9.0)', <a href="https://doi.org/10.4225/87/6BW27V">https://doi.org/10.4225/87/6BW27V</a> , ADA Dataverse, V7
Y15	2017	4671	Australian Government Department of Education, 2017, 'Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth, 2015 cohort (Version 8.0)', <a href="https://doi.org/10.4225/87/PJO7GB">https://doi.org/10.4225/87/PJO7GB</a> , ADA Dataverse, V16

**TABLE 2** Source of senior secondary participation in geography data in Australian jurisdictions.

Jurisdiction	Responsible authority	Location of data
Australian Capital Territory	ACT Board of senior secondary studies	<a href="http://www.bsss.act.edu.au/act_senior_secondary_system/certification-data">www.bsss.act.edu.au/act_senior_secondary_system/certification-data</a>
New South Wales	New South Wales education standards authority	<a href="http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos_stats.html">www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos_stats.html</a>
Northern Territory	Northern Territory Department of Education	<a href="http://www.education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/ntcet-statistics">www.education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/ntcet-statistics</a>
Queensland	Queensland curriculum and assessment authority	<a href="http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/news-data/statistics/">www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/news-data/statistics/</a>
South Australia	SACE board South Australia	<a href="http://www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/subject-enrolments/stage-2">www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/subject-enrolments/stage-2</a>
Tasmania	Tasmanian assessment standards and certification	<a href="http://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/open-access-data/">www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/open-access-data/</a>
Victoria	Victorian curriculum and assessment authority	<a href="http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/research-and-statistics/performance-senior-secondary/Pages/Index.aspx">www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/research-and-statistics/performance-senior-secondary/Pages/Index.aspx</a>
Western Australia	School curriculum and standards authority	<a href="http://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/secondary-education-statistics">www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/secondary-education-statistics</a>
Australia	Australian curriculum, assessment and reporting authority	<a href="https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments">https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments</a>

### 3.3 | Data analysis

The data were plotted and analysed using R (version 4.4.1). Linear models were fitted using regression, and any significant trends ( $p \leq 0.05$ , adjusted  $R^2 > 0.6$ ) are reported. Significant differences in means were assessed using two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with type III test. If ANOVA indicated the presence of significant differences in means (that is,  $p \leq 0.05$ ), then post hoc Tukey tests were used to identify which combinations had significant differences.

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Trends in student participation in senior geography from 1998 to 2017 in Australia

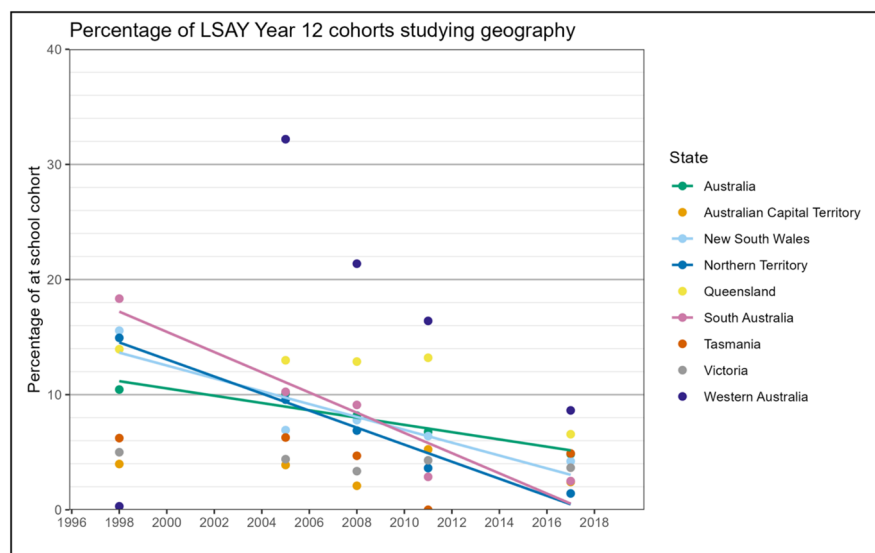
#### 4.1.1 | Year 12 geography participation for jurisdictions

On average, 8.1% of the LSAY at school cohort studied geography in any year between 1998 and 2017 (Table 3). The average proportion studying geography was greatest in Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia, and New South Wales, and lowest in the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria, and Tasmania. Western Australia had a significantly higher mean proportion of students studying geography than Victoria, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory. However, between 1998 and 2017, the percentage of the LSAY year 12 cohort studying geography significantly decreased by 0.3% each year nationally, with significant declines of 0.9% per year in South Australia, 0.7% per year in the Northern Territory, and 0.6% per year in New South Wales over the period (Figure 1 and

**TABLE 3** Year 12 geography participation, expressed as a percentage of the cohort at school population, over the period 1998–2017 for demographic factor groupings, based on the sampled LSAY cohorts.

Demographic factor	Factor category	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Trend between 1998 and 2017 (% of cohort per year)
State	Australia	4.8–10.4	8.1 <sup>b</sup>	2.3	8.2	−0.3
	ACT	2.1–5.2	3.5 <sup>bc</sup>	1.3	3.9	N.S.
	NSW	4.2–15.6	8.2 <sup>b</sup>	4.3	6.9	−0.6
	NT	1.4–14.9	7.3 <sup>b</sup>	5.3	6.9	−0.7
	QLD	6.6–14.0	11.9 <sup>b</sup>	3.0	13.0	N.S.
	SA	2.5–18.3	8.6 <sup>b</sup>	6.5	9.1	−0.9
	TAS	0.0–6.3	4.4 <sup>bc</sup>	2.6	4.9	N.S.
	VIC	3.4–5.0	4.1 <sup>bc</sup>	0.6	4.3	N.S.
School sector	WA	0.3–32.2	15.8 <sup>ab</sup>	12.2	16.4	N.S.
	Government	3.3–9.3	7.1 <sup>b</sup>	2.5	7.2	−0.3
	Catholic	4.9–9.8	7.1 <sup>b</sup>	2.0	6.8	−0.3
	Independent	7.6–15.2	12.2 <sup>a</sup>	3.2	12.8	−0.4
Gender	Female	5.4–9.7	7.8	1.8	8.2	−0.2
	Male	4.2–11.4	8.3	3.0	8.1	−0.4
Language spoken at home	English	5.1–10.9	8.4	2.4	8.6	−0.3
	Other	2.4–7.2	5.1	1.8	4.9	−0.2
	Multiple or not disclosed	0.0–11.4	3.9	5.1	1.1	N.S.

Note: Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between cohort means for the factor categories (that is, within that column for that factor) are shown with superscripts, with the same or shared letters indicating no difference. For instance, a mean with superscript 'a' is significantly greater than a mean with 'b', 'c', or 'd'; a mean with 'b' is not different from another mean with 'b', and a mean with 'ab' is not different from a mean with 'a' or a mean with 'b'. N. S. = not significant.



**FIGURE 1** Changes in the proportion of the LSAY year 12 cohort undertaking geography for the various jurisdictions within Australia between 1998 and 2017. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

Table 3). There were no significant linear trends in the percentage of the cohort studying geography in the Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia over this period. However, the percentage of the cohort studying geography was lower in 2017 than it had been in 1998 in most cases.

#### 4.1.2 | Year 12 geography participation for other demographic factors

LSAY participants were required to provide demographic information in addition to answering questions about their senior level subject selections, which provides additional insight into trends in geography

**TABLE 4** Balance between demographic factor groupings within the year 12 geography participants, expressed as a percentage of the year 12 geography cohort, over the period 1998–2017 based on the sampled LSAY cohorts.

Demographic factor	Factor category	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Trend between 1998 and 2017 (% of geography cohort per year)
School sector	Government	35.8–53.8	47.1 <sup>a</sup>	6.9	48.0	−0.9
	Catholic	20.1–27.9	22.6 <sup>c</sup>	3.2	21.1	N.S.
	Independent	26.1–36.3	30.3 <sup>b</sup>	3.9	30.5	+0.5
Gender	Female	49.3–62.4	54.6 <sup>a</sup>	5.1	55.1	+0.6
	Male	37.6–50.7	45.4 <sup>b</sup>	5.1	44.9	−0.6
Language spoken at home	English	91.0–95.6	94.0 <sup>a</sup>	1.8	94.3	N.S.
	Other	4.3–9.0	5.7 <sup>b</sup>	1.9	5.1	N.S.
	Multiple or not disclosed	0.0–0.9	0.3 <sup>c</sup>	0.4	0.2	N.S.

Note: Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between cohort means (that is, within that column) are shown with superscripts, with same or shared letters indicating no difference. For instance, a mean with superscript 'a' is significantly greater than a mean with 'b', 'c' or 'd'; a mean with 'b' is not different from another mean with 'b', and a mean with 'ab' is not different from a mean with 'a' or a mean with 'b'. N. S. = not significant.

participation patterns between 1998 and 2017. This section focusses on participation trends by school sector, gender, and language spoken at home. Demographic trends were explored for two contexts: (1) the total at school cohort and (2) the sub-cohort of students who studied geography. Taking gender as an example, in the first context the female percentage for 1998 is the number of females in the Y95 cohort who studied year 12 geography divided by the total number of females in the Y95 at school cohort. Within the second context, the female percentage for 1998 is the number of females in the Y95 cohort who studied geography divided by the total number of Y95 students who studied geography. Summary data for the demographic factor groupings are presented in Tables 3 and 4, whilst Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the data.

#### 4.1.3 | School sector

The average proportion of the cohort studying year 12 geography in independent schools between 1998 and 2017 was 12.2%, significantly higher than the 7.1% in Government and Catholic schools (Table 3). However, the percentage of the cohort studying geography significantly declined in all school sectors over the period (Figure 2 and Table 3). For example, the proportion studying year 12 geography at government schools was 9.3% in 1998 and 3.3% in 2017, equivalent to a decrease of 0.3% per year for the period, whereas at independent schools, the proportion was 15.2% in 1998 and 7.6% in 2017, equivalent to a decline of 0.4% per year. Within the geography cohort, the percentage of students from government schools declined from 53.8% in 1998 to 35.8% in 2017, equivalent to a 0.9% decrease per year, whilst the proportion at independent schools increased by 0.5% per year over the same period, reaching 36.3% (Figure 2 and Table 4).

#### 4.1.4 | Gender

The students in each cohort were given the option not to disclose their gender; however, none chose that option. The mean percentage of cohort females studying year 12 geography between 1998 and 2017 was 7.8%, which is not significantly different from the mean of 8.3% for males (Table 3). In 1998, the percentage of females studying year 12 geography was 9.7%, whilst by 2017, it had decreased to 5.4%, equivalent to a decrease of 0.2% per year (Figure 2 and Table 3). The percentage of males studying geography fell by 0.4% per year over the same period, from 11.4% in 1998 to 4.2% in 2017. Within the geography student cohort, the proportion of female students increased significantly between 1998 and 2017, finishing at 62.4% by 2017 (Figure 2 and Table 4).

#### 4.1.5 | Language spoken at home

The average proportion of students speaking English at home who studied Year 12 geography between 1998 and 2017 was 8.4%, compared to 5.1% of those who spoke other languages at home, and 3.9% for those who spoke multiple languages or did not disclose their language (Table 3). These differences were not statistically significant. Over the period 1998 to 2017, the percentage of the English speaking cohort studying Year 12 geography decreased by 0.3% per year, whilst where a language other than English was spoken, the percentage decreased by 0.2% per year, with no significant trend for those who spoke multiple languages at home or did not disclose their language background. More than 90% of the geography student cohort spoke English at home (Figure 2 and Table 4), with no significant changes in the balance between language backgrounds between 1998 and 2017.

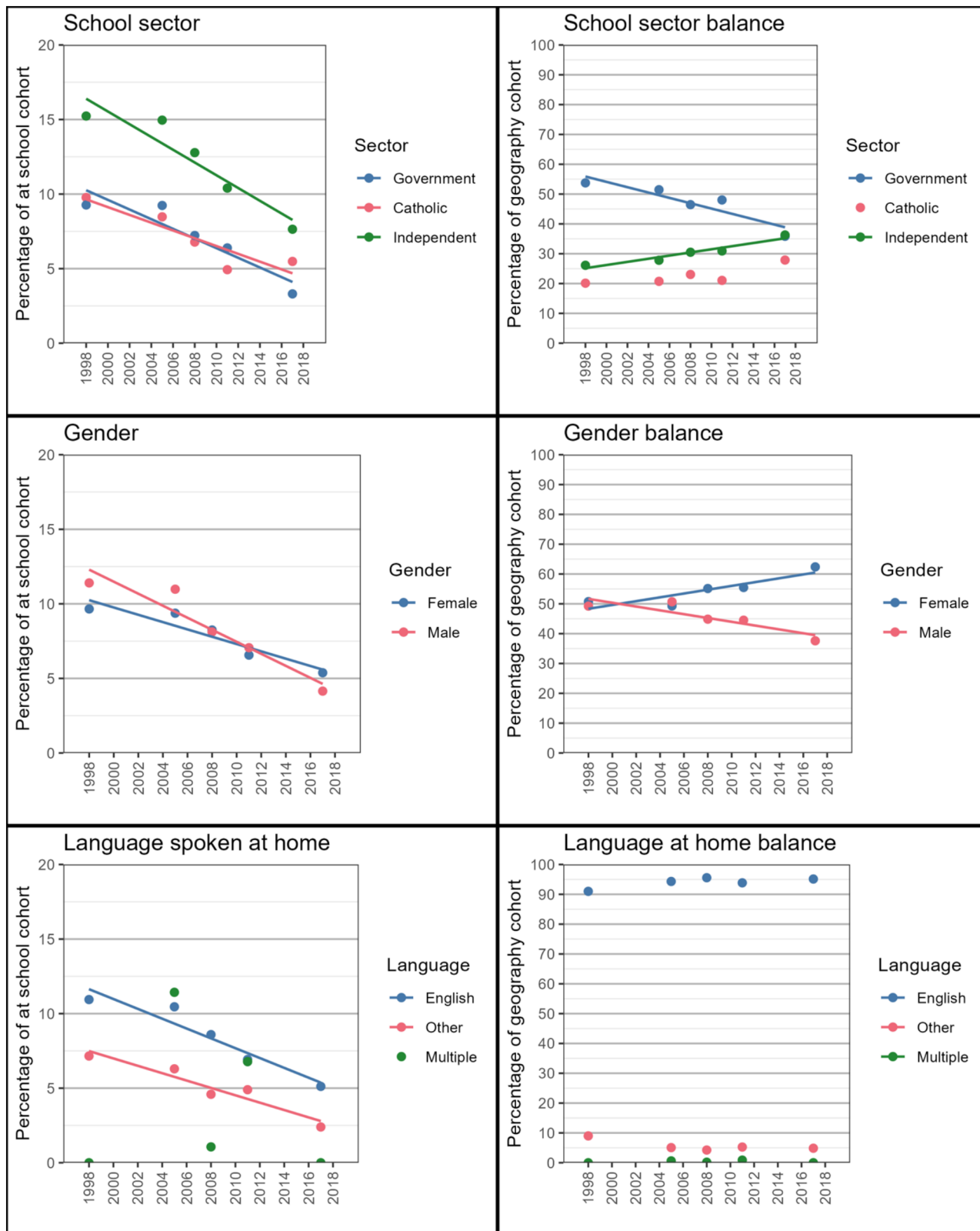


FIGURE 2 Changes in the proportion of the LSAY year 12 cohort undertaking geography and within the cohort studying geography between 1998 and 2017 for various demographic factor groupings. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

## 4.2 | Trends in student participation in senior geography from 2012 to 2023 in Australia

### 4.2.1 | Senior level geography participation

Over the period 2012 to 2023, an average of 13,041 Australian students studied year 12 geography in any year (Table 5). However, the number of students studying year 12 geography declined from 14,314 in 2012 to 11,187 in 2023, equivalent to 267 fewer students each year (Figure 3 and Table 5). The number of year 12 geography students remained steady in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia. Significant declines in the number of students studying year 12 geography occurred in Queensland, at 253 students per year, and in South Australia, at 15 students per year, over the period (Table 5). On

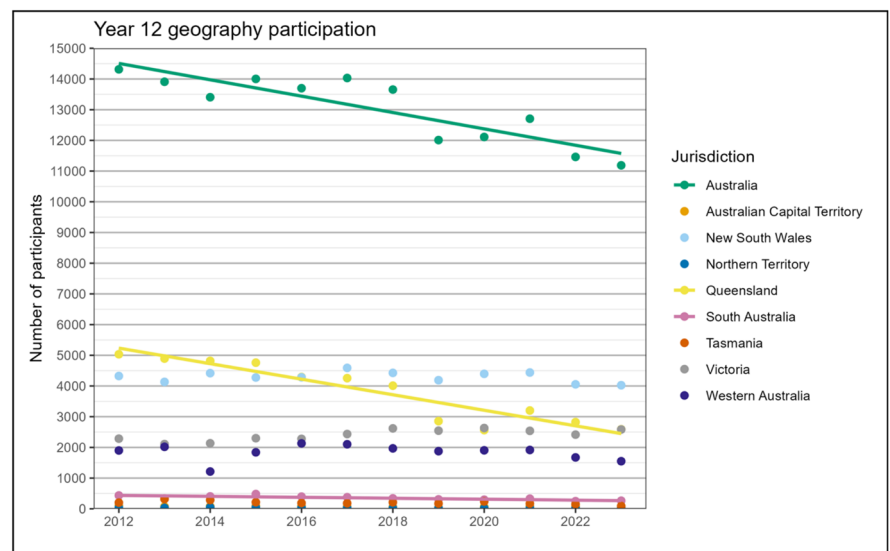
average, this means that 6% of the total Australian year 12 cohort studied geography in any given year (Table 5). Western Australia and Queensland had significantly higher proportions of their year 12 cohort studying geography than the other jurisdictions, whilst the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, and South Australia had significantly low cohort proportions undertaking year 12 geography (Table 5). Given the reported declines in student numbers, it is unsurprising that between 2012 and 2023, the percentage of the year 12 cohort studying geography significantly decreased by 0.2% each year nationally, by 0.6% per year in Queensland, and by 0.1% each year in South Australia (Figure 4 and Table 5). Please refer to Supporting Information (Appendix S1)' for the full dataset on annual year 12 geography participation by jurisdiction.

To put these year 12 cohort geography participation data in context, we now consider the ACARA reported

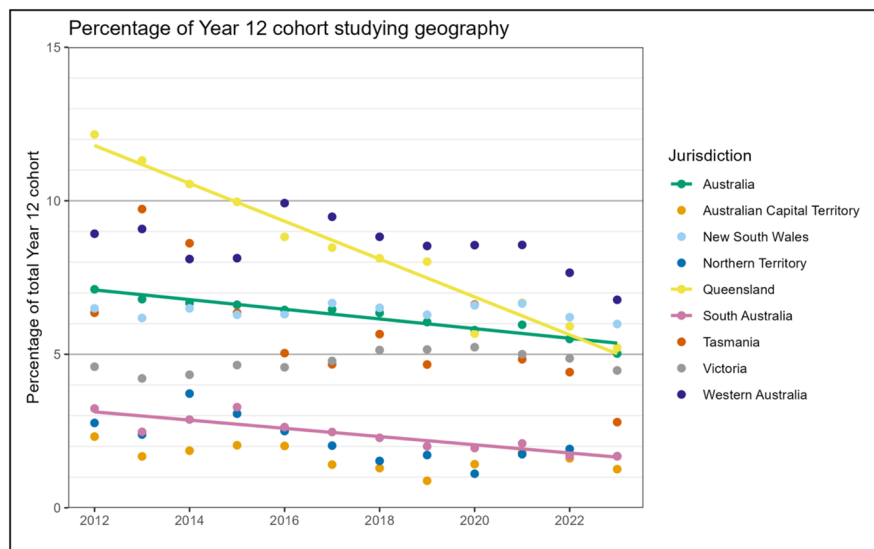
**TABLE 5** Summary data for year 12 geography participation for jurisdictions of Australia over the period 2012 to 2023.

Jurisdiction	Number of students (2012–2023)					Percentage of year 12 cohort (2012–2023)				
	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Trend per year	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Trend per year
Australia	11,187–14,314	13,041	1095	13,530	–267	5.0–7.1	6.2 <sup>b</sup>	0.6	6.4	–0.2
ACT	39–100	73	17	72	N.S.	0.9–2.3	1.6 <sup>d</sup>	0.4	1.6	N.S.
NSW	4025–4589	4,296	171	4304	N.S.	6.0–6.7	6.4 <sup>b</sup>	0.2	6.4	N.S.
NT	18–49	30	9	28	N.S.	1.1–3.7	2.2 <sup>d</sup>	0.7	2.0	N.S.
QLD	2563–5034	3842	883	1888	–253	5.2–12.2	8.4 <sup>a</sup>	2.3	8.3	–0.6
SA	249–481	352	70	338	–15	1.7–3.3	2.4 <sup>d</sup>	0.5	2.4	–0.1
TAS	91–318	202	60	196	N.S.	2.8–9.7	5.8 <sup>bc</sup>	1.9	5.4	N.S.
VIC	2108–2631	2406	183	2426	N.S.	4.2–5.2	4.8 <sup>c</sup>	0.3	4.7	N.S.
WA	1214–2,131	1841	256	1902	N.S.	6.8–9.9	8.6 <sup>a</sup>	0.8	8.6	N.S.

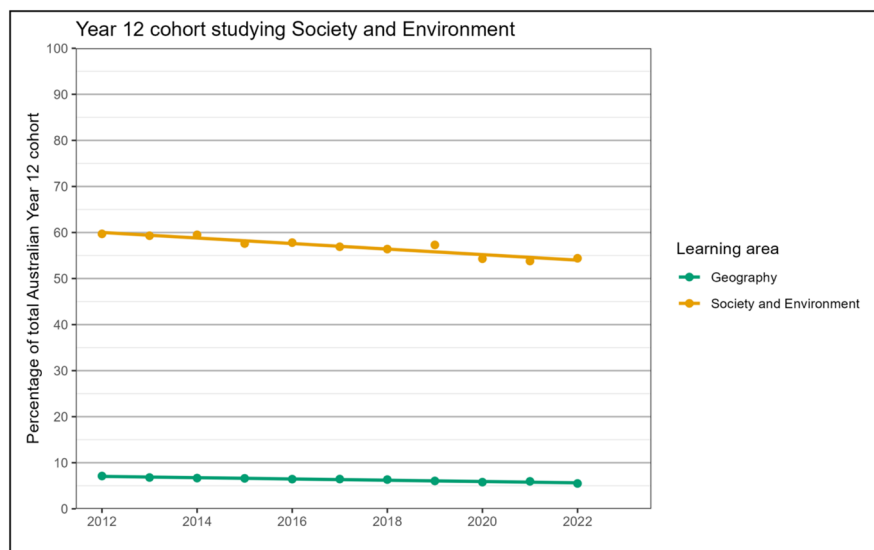
Note: Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between percentage of cohort means (that is, within that column) are shown with superscripts, with the same or shared letters indicating no difference. For instance, a mean with superscript 'a' is significantly greater than a mean with 'b', 'c', or 'd'; a mean with 'b' is not different from another mean with 'b', and a mean with 'ab' is not different from a mean with 'a' or a mean with 'b'.



**FIGURE 3** Changes in the number of students undertaking year 12 level geography for the various jurisdictions within Australia. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).



**FIGURE 4** Changes in the proportion of the year 12 cohort undertaking geography for the various jurisdictions within Australia. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).



**FIGURE 5** Change in the proportion of the Australian year 12 cohort undertaking geography and the total for society and environment. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.8$ ).

number of Australian year 12 students studying ‘Society and Environment’ subjects for the period 2012 to 2022, the most recent reported year. Whilst the proportion of Australian year 12 students studying Society and Environment subjects accounted for more than half the total cohort in any year, less than 10% of the total cohort studied geography and this proportion has significantly declined by 0.2% each year (Figure 5 and Table 6). Notably, the proportion studying Society and Environment also declined by 0.6% per year over the period.

#### 4.2.2 | Year 12 geography participation between 2012 and 2023 considering student gender

Most Australian jurisdictions reported the number of students of different genders completing senior year

subjects between 2012 and 2023, whilst others such as Tasmania and the Northern Territory did not. This means that an overall Australian measure cannot be determined. Data are available from 2012 to 2013 in South Australia, Victoria, and Western Australia, from 2012 to 2019 in Queensland, from 2019 to 2023 in New South Wales, and from 2021 to 2023 in the Australian Capital Territory. Although some jurisdictions reported additional gender options from 2017 or later, the number of geography students for those options was extremely small; thus, our analysis focusses on gender in terms of females and males. This section explores the number of students of each gender undertaking year 12 geography, the percentage of students from a given gender cohort who undertook year 12 geography, and the overall gender balance within the year 12 geography cohort for jurisdictions where data are publicly available.

TABLE 6 Proportion of Australian year 12 cohort studying society and environment between 2012 and 2022.

	Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Trend per year
Geography	5.5–7.1	6.3	0.5	6.4	−0.2
Society and environment	53.8–59.7	57.0	2.1	57.3	−0.6

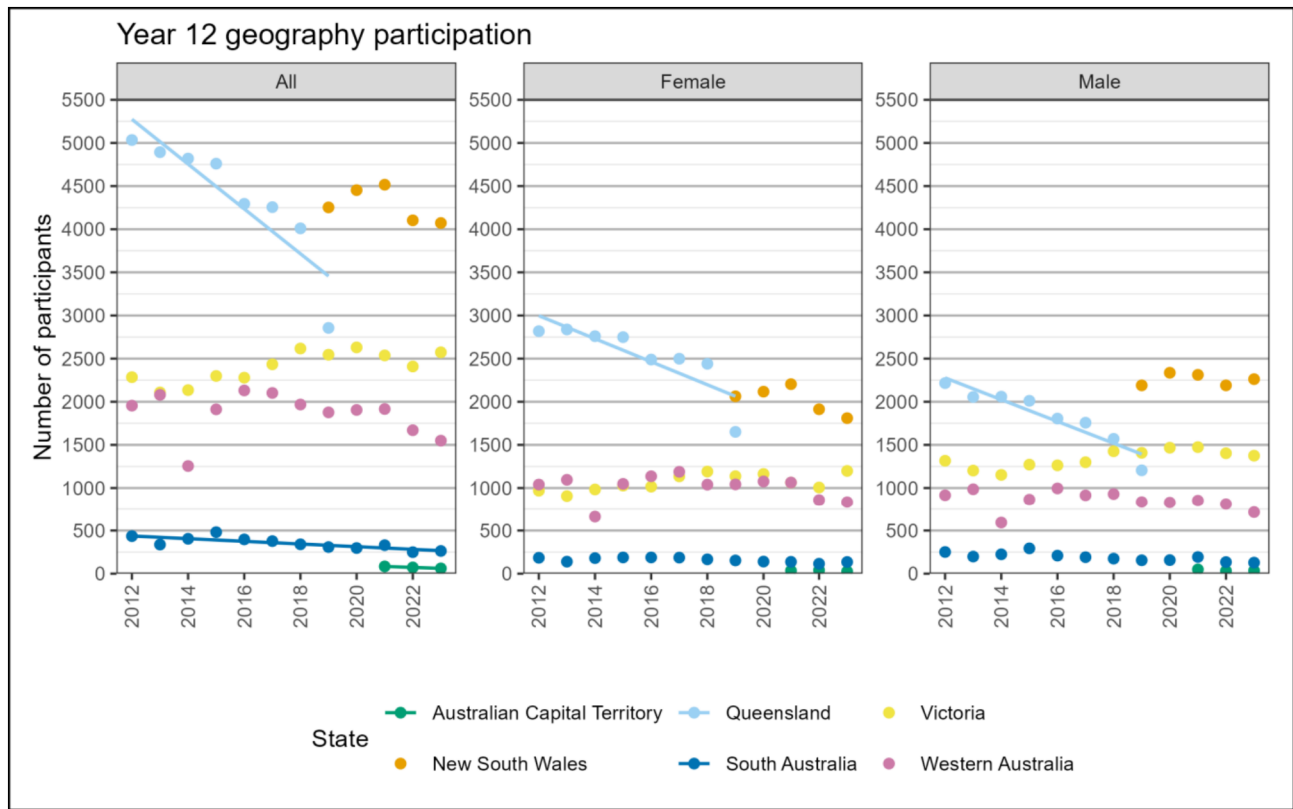
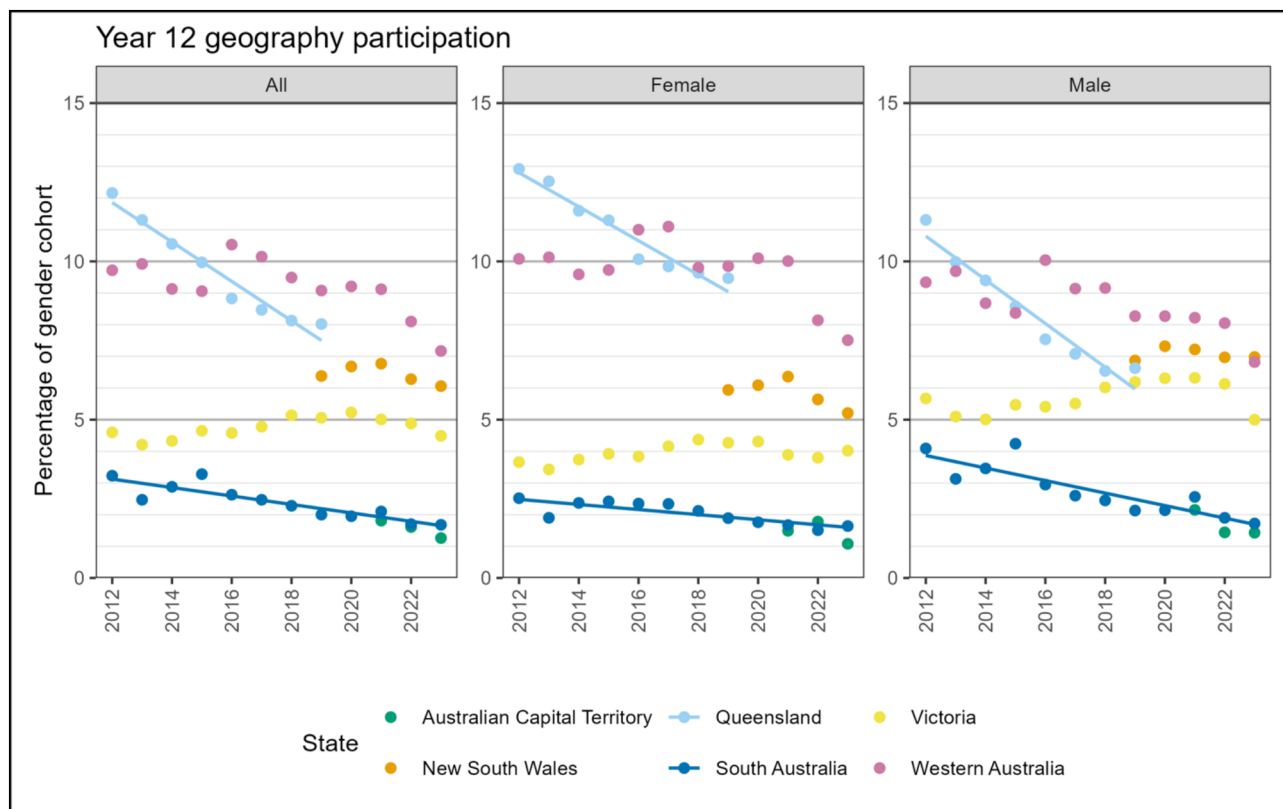


FIGURE 6 Number of students of each gender undertaking year 12 level geography between 2012 and 2023 for the various jurisdictions within Australia where senior year gender data are reported. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

Whilst the overall number of students of all genders studying year 12 geography significantly declined by 12 students per year in the Australian Capital Territory between 2021 and 2023, by 15 students per year in South Australia between 2012 and 2023, and by 260 students per year in Queensland between 2012 and 2019, it was only in Queensland where significant reductions in the number of females or males studying year 12 geography occurred over the period (Figure 6). The number of males studying geography was highest in Queensland and New South Wales, followed by Victoria, then Western Australia, and lowest in South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. There were no significant differences between the mean number of females and males studying year 12 geography within a jurisdiction, except for Queensland, where the average number of females studying year 12 geography between 2012 and 2019 was significantly higher than the number of males.

The mean percentage of the female cohort studying year 12 geography was highest in Queensland (10.9%) and Western Australia (9.8%) and lowest in South Australia (2.0%) and the Australian Capital Territory (1.5%). For males, the mean percentage of cohort studying geography was highest in Western Australia (8.7%), Queensland (8.4%), and New South Wales (7.1%), and lowest in South Australia (2.8%) and the Australian Capital Territory (1.7%). The percentage of each gender cohort who studied year 12 geography significantly declined in Queensland and South Australia over the reported periods, with no linear trends occurring in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Victoria, or Western Australia (Figure 7). In Queensland, the percentage of all females undertaking geography declined by 0.5% per year, and the percentage of all males by 0.7% per year between 2012 and 2019. In South Australia, the percentage of all females studying geography declined by 0.1%, and the



**FIGURE 7** Changes in the proportion of the year 12 gender cohorts undertaking geography for the jurisdictions within Australia where senior year gender data are reported. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

percentage of all males by 0.2% per year between 2012 and 2023.

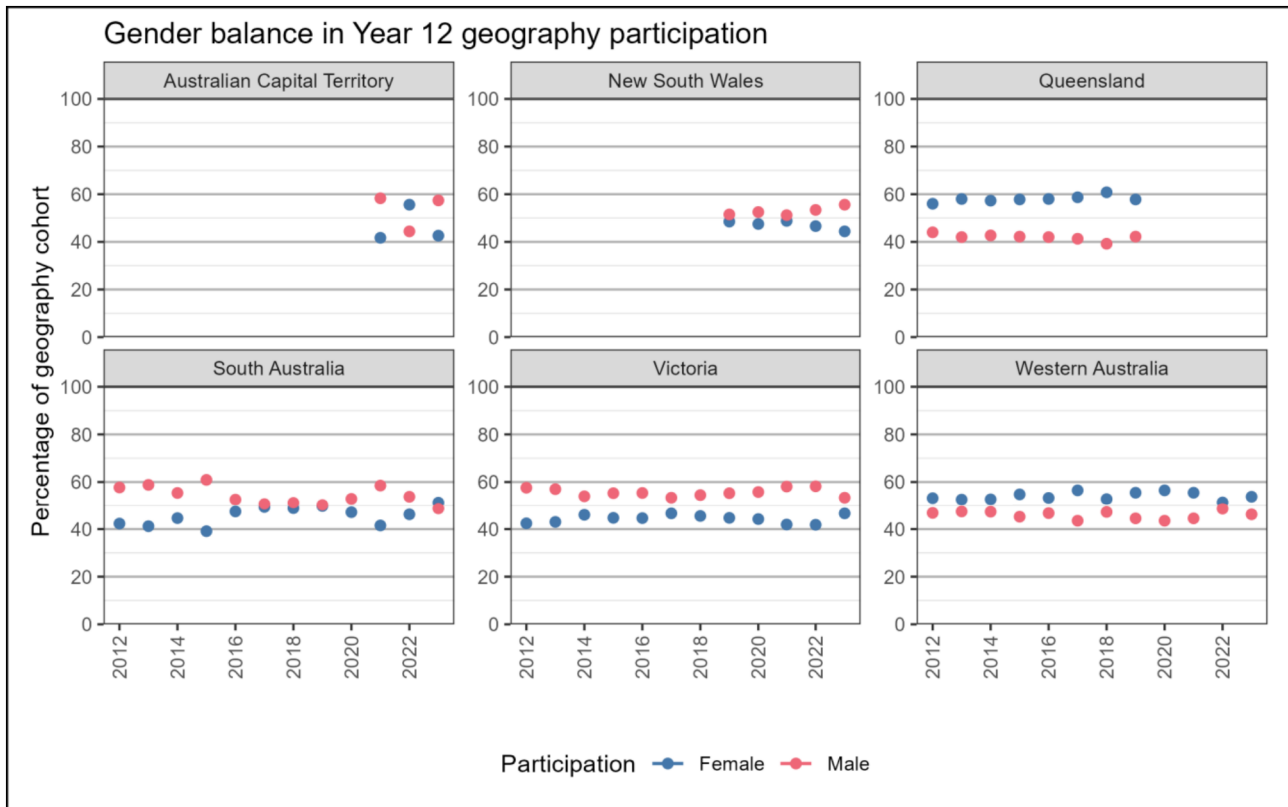
For the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia, there were no significant differences between the percentage of female and male cohorts who studied year 12 geography for the period where data were available. In Victoria, 5.7% of the total male cohort studied year 12 geography between 2012 and 2023, which was significantly higher than the 4.0% of the female cohort who chose to study year 12 geography over the same period. However, in Queensland, the proportion of the female cohort studying year 12 geography was 10.9%, significantly higher than the 8.4% of the male cohort who studied year 12 geography between 2012 and 2019.

There were no significant linear changes in the gender balance of the year 12 geography cohort in any jurisdiction for the periods that data were available (Figure 8). The difference in means for the percentage of female and male geography students in the ACT and NSW was not significant, indicating an even gender balance. However, for year 12 geography in Victoria and South Australia, the average proportion of males significantly exceeded the average proportion of females, whilst in Queensland and Western Australia, the

average proportion of females significantly exceeded the average proportion of males. Focussing in on the percentage of one gender or the other, the mean in Queensland and Western Australia was significantly different from that in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, and Victoria (Table 7). For females the means in Queensland and Western Australia were significantly higher than in the other jurisdictions, whilst for males, the mean in those two states was significantly lower than in the other jurisdictions (Table 7).

### 4.3 | What do these trends suggest for the future of year 12 geography in Australia?

It is clear from Figure 9 and Table 8 that the proportion of the Australian student cohort undertaking year 12 geography was higher in the late 1990s than it is in the 2020s. In South Australia and Western Australia, the mean percentage of the cohort studying year 12 geography over the period 2012 to 2023 was significantly lower than the mean percentage for the period 1998 to 2017 (Table 8). Whilst several jurisdictions had significant linear declines in geography participation in



**FIGURE 8** Change in the gender balance within the year 12 geography cohort between 2012 and 2023 for the jurisdictions within Australia where senior year gender data are reported. Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

**TABLE 7** Gender balance within year 12 geography participants for Australian jurisdictions between 2012 and 2023, expressed as the percentage of all year 12 geography students.

State	Dates	Gender					
		Female			Male		
		Range	Mean	Standard deviation	Range	Mean	Standard deviation
ACT	2021–2023	41.7–55.6	46.6 <sup>b</sup>	7.8	44.4–58.3	53.4 <sup>a</sup>	7.8
NSW	2019–2023	44.4–48.8	47.2 <sup>b</sup>	1.8	51.2–55.6	52.8 <sup>a</sup>	1.8
QLD	2012–2019	56.0–60.8	58.0 <sup>a</sup>	1.4	39.2–44.0	42.0 <sup>b</sup>	1.4
SA	2012–2023	39.1–51.3	45.7 <sup>b</sup>	3.9	48.7–60.9	54.3 <sup>a</sup>	3.9
VIC	2012–2023	41.8–46.6	44.3 <sup>b</sup>	1.7	53.4–58.2	55.7 <sup>a</sup>	1.7
WA	2012–2023	51.4–56.5	54.0 <sup>a</sup>	1.7	43.4–48.6	46.0 <sup>b</sup>	1.7

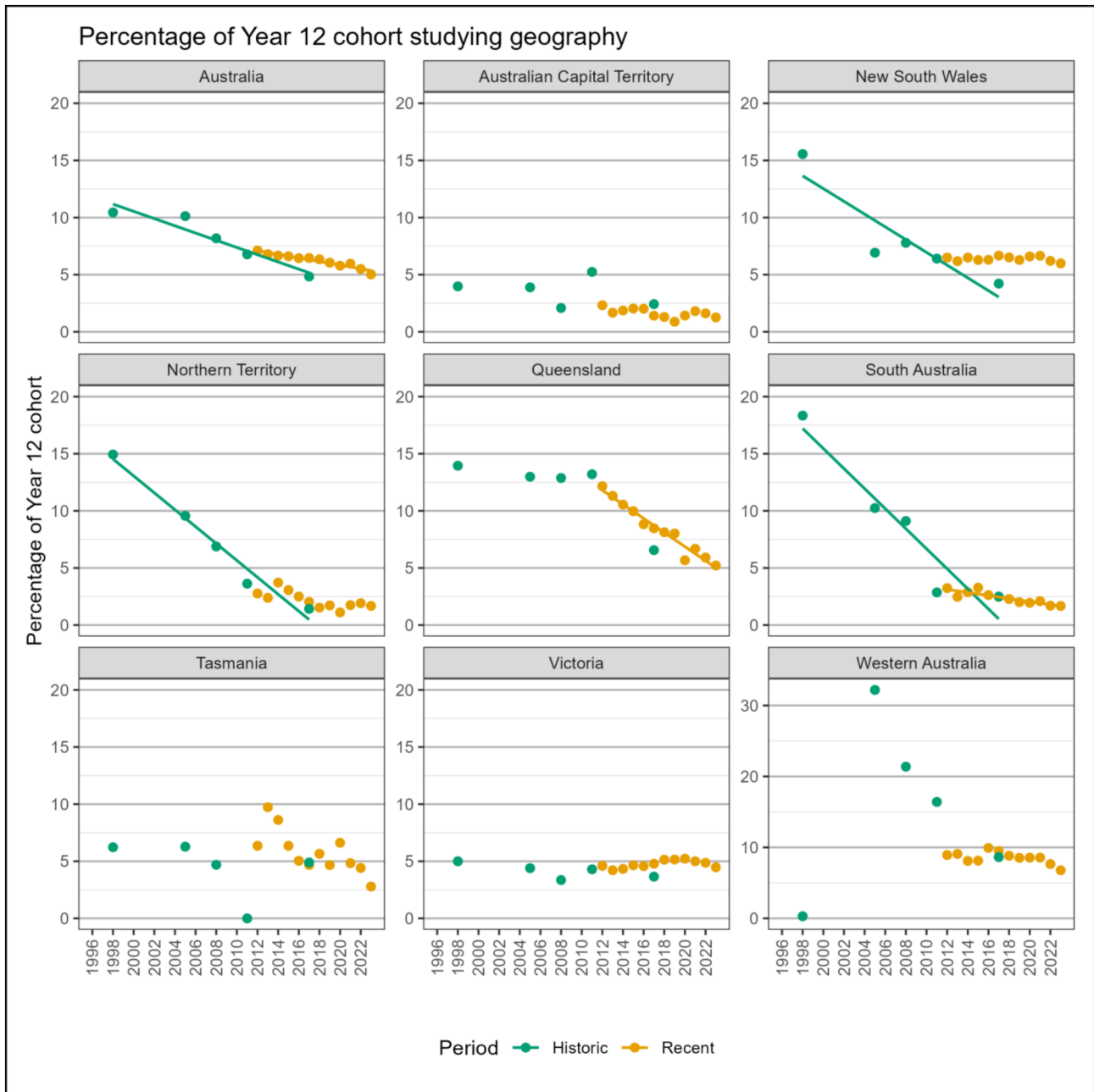
Note: Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between cohort means (that is, within that column) are shown with superscripts, with same or shared letters indicating no difference. For instance, a mean with superscript 'a' is significantly greater than a mean with 'b', 'c', or 'd'; a mean with 'b' is not different from another mean with 'b', and a mean with 'ab' is not different from a mean with 'a' or a mean with 'b'.

either period, only Australia nationally and South Australia had declines in both periods. As of 2023, nationally 5% of students chose to study year 12 geography. More than 5% of the student cohort in New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia study year 12 geography, about 5% of the Victorian student cohort studies year 12 geography, whilst less than 5% of the year 12 student cohort study geography

in the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, South Australia, and Tasmania.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Senior secondary geography enrolment nationally has more than halved in the past 25 years; today, only 5%



**FIGURE 9** Changes in the proportion of the cohort undertaking year 12 geography for Australian jurisdictions historically between 1998 and 2017 (based on LSAY cohort data), and more recently between 2012 and 2023 (using state data). Any shown trend lines are significant ( $p \leq 0.05$ ,  $R^2 > 0.6$ ).

of our students graduate from senior secondary school with some specialist geography knowledge. This is unevenly distributed across the states and territories: whereas 8.6 in every 100 students graduating in Western Australia have been schooled in the discipline, only 1.6 in every 100 will graduate with such knowledge and understanding in the Australian Capital Territory. Hypothesising the reasons for differences between states and territories is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, we focus on the overall persisting downward trend across all states and territories, suggesting that

nationally, student senior geography participation will continue to decline. Although SOSE as a whole is losing popularity amongst students, geography is in particular danger.

This problem is not peculiar to Australia; jurisdictions like Scotland and the USA also face challenges in recruiting geography students in the senior schooling years. Yet in England, there was an upward trend in A level geography enrolment up to 2023. Undoubtedly ongoing advocacy by the geography education community has played a vital role. In England, community

**TABLE 8** Comparison of mean percentage of the year 12 cohort studying geography over the period 1998 to 2017 (historic), and the period 2012 to 2023 (recent).

Jurisdiction	Historic (1998–2017)			Recent (2012–2023)			Difference in means (recent – historic)
	Range	Mean	Linear trend (% per year)	Range	Mean	Linear trend (% per year)	
Australia	4.8–10.4	8.1 <sup>b</sup>	–0.3	5.0–7.1	6.2 <sup>b</sup>	–0.2	–1.9 (N.S.)
ACT	2.1–5.2	3.5 <sup>bc</sup>	N.S.	0.9–2.3	1.6 <sup>d</sup>	N.S.	–1.9 (N.S.)
NSW	4.2–15.6	8.2 <sup>b</sup>	–0.6	6.0–6.7	6.4 <sup>b</sup>	N.S.	–1.8 (N.S.)
NT	1.4–14.9	7.3 <sup>b</sup>	–0.7	1.1–3.7	2.2 <sup>d</sup>	N.S.	–5.1 (N.S.)
QLD	6.6–14.0	11.9 <sup>b</sup>	N.S.	5.2–12.2	8.4 <sup>a</sup>	–0.6	–3.5 (N.S.)
SA	2.5–18.3	8.6 <sup>b</sup>	–0.9	1.7–3.3	2.4 <sup>d</sup>	–0.1	–6.2
TAS	0.0–6.3	4.4 <sup>bc</sup>	N.S.	2.8–9.7	5.8 <sup>bc</sup>	N.S.	+1.4 (N.S.)
VIC	3.4–5.0	4.1 <sup>bc</sup>	N.S.	4.2–5.2	4.8 <sup>c</sup>	N.S.	+0.7 (N.S.)
WA	0.3–32.2	15.8 <sup>ab</sup>	N.S.	6.8–9.9	8.6 <sup>a</sup>	N.S.	–7.2

Note: Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between cohort means (that is, within that column) are shown with superscripts, with the same or shared letters indicating no difference. For instance, a mean with superscript 'a' is significantly greater than a mean with 'b', 'c', or 'd'; a mean with 'b' is not different from another mean with 'b', and a mean with 'ab' is not different from a mean with 'a' or a mean with 'b'. N. S. = not significant.

concern for geography enrolment and participation is evident in the RGS and GA's regular monitoring and analysis of enrolment and participation figures. This data tracking has enabled the RGS to express concerns in recent years about the lack of diversity amongst senior years and tertiary geography students despite healthy enrolments—a reflection of the ongoing challenges of decolonising the geography curriculum and discipline. There is much for us to learn from these international insights.

Here in Australia, despite the immensity of the problem, there is no systematic tracking of geography enrolment and participation across and within states and territories. We have contributed to redressing these knowledge gaps in this paper. For the first time, we have charted the longitudinal trends in terms of school sector, gender, and home language amongst year 12 geography students. These findings raise important questions. For instance, right up to 2017, more than 90% of Australia's senior geography cohort spoke English at home. We know that Australian schools are increasingly diverse; about 20% of year 10 students are from language backgrounds other than English in 2018 (ACARA, 2019) rising to 27% in 2023 (ACARA, 2024). Why might students from diverse backgrounds be less inclined to study senior level geography? As for the trends in gender balance, why are females still less represented in senior geography than males in most states and territories?

Elsewhere we have reported that 21% of Australian schools surveyed in 2019 did not offer senior geography; this uneven provision of geography across schools has important implications for 'who has and who doesn't have access to rigorous geography education' (Kriewaldt et al., 2024, p.44). Taken together, our findings suggest that geography's decline is the result of a combination of supply (provision) and demand issues.

In terms of supply, some schools are unable to provide students with access to geography education in the senior years for a variety of reasons, including the dominance of commerce and history teachers in humanities departments and a compounding problem of nationally high prevalence of out-of-field geography teachers. Demand for subjects is in part a function of supply—insufficient access to quality geography education in the junior years can lead to disengaged students who would then be less likely to elect to study it at senior level. Given that less than 10% of SOSE students are geography students, it can be inferred that students favour other SOSE subjects over geography. This may be related to the perception that the subject has low utility for advancement to tertiary education and for employment. The public's understanding of the discipline and its relevance to society also remains weak.

The evidence presented in this paper serves as a sobering reminder for all in the geography community to ensure that our discipline remains relevant and effectively communicates this relevance beyond our community. We suggest several areas for further research. First, regular and systematic tracking of school geography data is needed to provide a strong evidence base to inform policy. Second, investigating the differences in enrolment between states and territories might surface policy differences which, again, can inform future policy decisions. Third, empirical research on students' experiences in secondary geography classrooms is critically important for us to understand the extent to which the geography curriculum is responsive to the changing profiles of learners in our classrooms. Finally, further research on geography teacher education is needed to know how we are ensuring a pipeline of teachers capable of re-energising geography enrolment in schools. Learning from England's experience, these

are the prerogatives not only for researchers but also others in the geography community. Academic geographers, geography teachers, teacher educators, and leaders of professional associations must work together to revitalise school geography in Australia and reshape its future to ensure pathways into geography-related studies and careers remain attractive.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

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### ETHICS STATEMENT

No ethics approval is associated with this original paper.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for the period 1998–2017 that support the findings of this study were collected by the Australian Government's Department of Education and Training through the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY data are managed on behalf of the Australian Government by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under licence for this study. LSAY data are available at <https://www.lsay.edu.au/data> or by contacting the NCVER by email at [lsay@ncver.edu.au](mailto:lsay@ncver.edu.au). The data for the period 2012 to 2023 that support the findings of this study are available at <https://doi.org/10.26188/30729548>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority's National Report on Schooling in Australia year 12 Subject Enrolments [www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments](http://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-subject-enrolments); the ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies' Certification Data [www.bsss.act.edu.au/act\\_senior\\_secondary\\_system/certification-data](http://www.bsss.act.edu.au/act_senior_secondary_system/certification-data); New South Wales Government Education Standards Authority's Complete Board of Studies NSW Statistics Archive [www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos\\_stats.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/ebos/static/ebos_stats.html); Northern Territory Department of Education's NTCET Statistics [www.education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/ntcet-statistics](http://www.education.nt.gov.au/statistics-research-and-strategies/ntcet-statistics); Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Statistics [www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/news-data/statistics](http://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/news-data/statistics); SACE Board South Australia's SACE Data for completions [www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/completion](http://www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/completion) and subject enrolments [www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/subject-enrolments/stage-2](http://www.sace.sa.edu.au/web/sace-data/subject-enrolments/stage-2); Tasmanian

Assessment Standards and Certification's Tasmania Certificate of Education Statistics for State Level Attainment and Direct Continuation [www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/tce-statistics](http://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/tce-statistics) and Scaled Course Data [www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/open-access-data](http://www.tasc.tas.gov.au/about/data/open-access-data); Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's Performance in Senior Secondary [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/research-and-statistics/performance-senior-secondary/Pages/Index.aspx](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/research-and-statistics/performance-senior-secondary/Pages/Index.aspx); and Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority's Secondary Education Statistics [www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/secondary-education-statistics](http://www.scsa.wa.edu.au/publications/reports/statistical-reports/secondary-education-statistics).

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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