

Non-technical summary for 'What Is Driving Participation and Diversity Trends in Economics? A Survey of High School Students'

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There has been a dramatic decline in Australia's Year 12 Economics enrolments over the past 3 decades. Alongside the decline in numbers, the gender balance has shifted from roughly equal numbers of male and female students in the early 1990s, to males outnumbering females 2:1 in recent years. The size and diversity of the Economics student population matters for both students and broader society. Economics at the high school level provides a basic level of economic literacy. Furthermore, as studying Economics is often the start of a pathway to a career in economics, the diversity of the student body ultimately shapes the discipline.

In this paper, we seek to better understand these trends by looking at the demand-side factors contributing to the decline in Economics enrolments. In particular, we ask 3 key questions. First, which school and individual characteristics are most strongly associated with choosing Economics? Second, what are students' perceptions of Economics? And third, how do perceptions differ by sex and socio-economic background?

To answer these questions the Reserve Bank of Australia commissioned a survey of more than 4,800 students in Years 10 to 12 from New South Wales high schools. The survey asked students about how and why they choose subjects, what is influencing their preferences for Economics, and their perceptions of Economics.

We find that students typically have positive perceptions of economics as a field; they think that economics is used for social good and is not just all about money. However, the perceptions of Economics as a subject tend to be negative; for example, that Economics is not interesting, has a heavier workload than most other Year 11 and 12 subjects, and is less useful than Business Studies. Consequently, a challenge in increasing overall enrolments in Economics is to build interest, relevance and understanding to motivate high school students to study the subject.

We find that socio-economic status is the key *school-level* characteristic associated with the likelihood of a student studying Economics, while sex is the key *student-level* characteristic. That is, students are more likely to study Economics if they are male or in a school with a higher socio-economic status. This reflects underlying differences in perceptions of Economics.

Males and students from a higher socio-economic background have more favourable perceptions of Economics than other students. Importantly, females and students from a lower socio-economic background are less likely to perceive they 'have a good understanding of what Economics is'. Even taking differences in perceived understanding into account, however, females are still less likely to 'have a clear idea of whether I would be good at Economics' and students from a lower socio-economic background are less likely to feel 'I could do well in Economics if I put my mind to it'. Without data on the actual academic ability of individual students, it is not clear whether these differences reflect accurate assessments of ability, opportunity to do well, or a lack of confidence (for a given level of ability). Nevertheless, this result implies that, while interventions that provide information (i.e. increase understanding of what Economics is) may help, they are unlikely to be enough to equalise participation in Economics.

We also find that males are more likely to find Economics interesting (even accounting for perceived understanding). This may reflect an inherent difference in interest in economics between the sexes. Or it may reflect that the nature of the topics included in the Year 11 and 12 Economics syllabus appeal more to males than females; we find evidence that specific topics of interest do differ between the sexes.

This research provides an evidence base for those engaged in Economics education – and the economics profession more broadly – to promote participation and diversity in the study of Economics. The results may

also inform how educators and career advisors communicate with students about subject choices in general and Economics in particular. This evidence base, and resulting interventions, are a stepping stone to promoting economic literacy among the population and cultivating a pipeline of future economists who are more representative of society.