EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The diverse range of students who now stay to complete secondary school have a wide range of choices available to them in their selection of subjects. Year 12 students in Australia are not only diverse in their social and economic backgrounds but in their previous achievements, interests and aspirations. For these reasons it is important to monitor the nature of the curriculum that students experience. It is important to ensure that students experience a senior secondary curriculum that provides them with the knowledge and skills on which to base fulfilling personal lives, successful labour market outcomes and the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the society in which they live.

Choices that are made in the subjects studied in senior secondary school influence differences in access to higher education, vocational education and training, and to labour market outcomes. Previous studies have shown that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, those from private schools, high early school achievers and students from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to participate in the courses that are avenues to higher education and the professions. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to participate in courses that lead to vocational education and training or more often to entry into the labour market without any further formal education or training. Hence there are compelling reasons concerned with equity, as well as effectiveness, for monitoring patterns of subject choice among students in Year 12.

This report uses data from the 1995 cohort participating in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project, particularly the 1998 data on Year 12 subject choice and the 1995 data relating to student demographics and achievement in literacy and numeracy. It examines patterns of subject enrolments in Year 12 in Australian schools, and the relationship of those patterns to characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic background, ethnic background, location of school, school system, and earlier school achievement. Enrolments are measured by both participation rates and by enrolment indices, which are a weighted percentage of the enrolments in an area of study, and represent curriculum share for the particular subject.

Typically, Australian students study between four and six subjects in Year 12. Almost all study an English subject, and almost 90 per cent study at least one mathematics subject. The next highest participation rates are for the biological and other sciences (43 per cent) and humanities and social sciences (40 per cent). Just over one-quarter (28 per cent) of students study a physical science.

Since the subject choice report in 1994, enrolments in English and Mathematics have remained reasonably stable. In general, subject enrolments in Studies of Society and Environment have declined, with the exception of business studies. In the Sciences, there has been an increase in the proportion of students enrolled in general science subjects. Enrolments in the Arts and Languages other than English have remained reasonably stable, while in the Technology area, enrolments in computer studies, technical studies and food and catering have increased substantially while those in home economics have declined. In Health and Physical Education, enrolments in health have increased.

Gender was found to be one of the student characteristics accounting for the greatest proportion of variation in student enrolments. As found in previous subject choice reports, males predominate in the areas of Mathematics, particularly in higher level mathematics, physical sciences, technical studies, computer studies and physical education. Females predominate in the areas of English, humanities and social sciences, biological sciences, the arts, languages other than English, home sciences and health studies.
Enrolments in Mathematics, and more particularly in the physical sciences, were found to be influenced by socioeconomic background as measured both by parents’ occupations and by parents’ educational levels. Enrolments were consistently higher in these subject areas for students from the higher socioeconomic background. Enrolments for the Technology Key Learning Area were consistently higher for those students from a lower socioeconomic background.

Since the 1994 study of subject choice there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of students undertaking Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects as part of their studies. According to this survey, approximately 16 per cent (about one in six) of Year 12 students in Australia indicated at least one VET subject as part of their program. Participation was greater for those from a lower socioeconomic background (19.3 per cent compared to 8.7 per cent for those from the highest socioeconomic levels), for those with parents with lower levels of education and those with lower levels of early school achievement in literacy and numeracy. Students from a non-English speaking background were not as likely to participate in VET, nor were students from independent schools or students in capital cities.