Curtin University

The merger proposal: claim vs fact



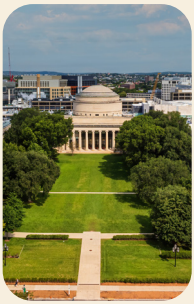
The WA Government announced in October 2026 that it was undertaking a business case into the merger of Curtin University, Murdoch University and The University of Western Australia.

This fact sheet helps clarify some of the claims that have been made about rankings, mergers and tertiary education in Western Australia.



CLAIM: MERGING WILL LIFT OUR GLOBAL RANKINGS

FACT: Nobody can predict it. Merged universities haven't reliably outranked their predecessors. Adelaide's merger gave a minor lift on QS and ARWU and a fall on THE[1].



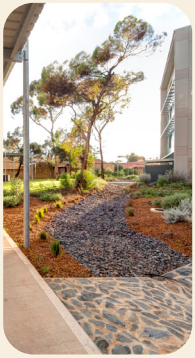
CLAIM: BIGGER UNIVERSITIES RANK HIGHER

FACT: The typical top-10 university (QS 2027) has about 25,000 students. Caltech, ranked seventh, has about 2,400. A merged WA university would have almost 120,000.



CLAIM: A MERGER WILL GROW STUDENT NUMBERS

FACT: Federal caps now limit domestic and international places at each university, so a merger adds none. Andrew Norton, higher education expert, says Adelaide University now has about 620 fewer domestic places than if the two had stayed separate[2].



CLAIM: WA UNIVERSITIES HAVE LET REGIONAL STUDENTS DOWN

FACT: WA's 12.5% regional participation rate is the lowest in the country, but WA also has the lowest proportion of people living regionally[3]. Adjusted for that, WA ranks ahead of NSW and Queensland.



CLAIM: PERTH HAS TOO MANY UNIVERSITIES

FACT: Perth has fewer universities per million people than any other Australian capital except Melbourne[4].

CLAIM: HIGHER RANKINGS BRING MORE RESEARCH INCOME

FACT: Annual federal research funding allocations are calculated on past HDR completions and research income. Merging just adds them together, rather than increasing them. Other sources of research income, like competitive grants and industry contracts, are awarded on the strength of the project proposal, the expertise of the researchers and the potential for real-world impact, not rankings.





CLAIM: ADELAIDE PROVES THAT MERGERS WORK

FACT: Adelaide merged only two universities and had co-location, shared vision and the uninimous support of both vice-chancellors and university councils. None of these factors are present in the WA scenario. Even with those factors in its favour, Adelaide University reported a $90 million revenue shortfall in semester one, with international students down 40%[5].

References

This flyer was created **19 October, 2026**

1. QS: Quacquarelli Symonds (QSWorld University Rankings); ARWU: Academic Ranking of World Universities; THE: Times Higher Education (THE World University Rankings)
2. Andrew Norton: The proposed new funding system, part 3: Capping over-enrolments - 2 July 2026
3. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census
4. ABS estimated resident population, Greater Capital City Statistical Area, 30 June 2024; Universities list from Australian Government Study Australia. Institutions with a physical presence in that city are counted, including universities with a multi-city presence, e.g. CQ. Notre Dame, based in Fremantle, is included in Perth's count, given the proximity.
5. Exclusive: Adelaide Uni in red as international student numbers plummet - InDaily, Inside South Australia, 2 June 2026