

# Male access and success in higher education

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A discussion paper





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## Introduction

Jane Berry, the Higher Education Academy

Following the publication by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) of the recommendations of the Ethnicity Gender and Degree Attainment (EGDA) Project in January 2008, the HEA has been engaged in the delivery of a programme of activities to support the sector in addressing the findings. Whilst this work has focussed more specifically on the attainment of Black and minority ethnic students, as part our wider work to develop evidence-informed approaches to improving the retention and success of all students, we hosted a seminar in July 2010 on 'Male access and success in HE'. This was in response to continuing sector wide concerns not only about gendered differences in attainment but also in the participation and retention of male students.

This discussion paper, authored by presenters at the seminar, has been produced to raise the profile of the agenda and to promote and inform the debate within and between institutions about gendered differentials in HE. It seeks to provide an overview of the issues based on the latest research evidence, and to highlight some institutional strategies designed to address the barriers thought to account, in part, for the under-achievement of male students. In using the broader language of 'success' we are recognising that students benefit from participation in HE in a wider range of ways than attaining 'a good degree', namely in their personal development and progression into the labour market or further learning.

The target audience is: policy makers; funders; senior managers in HEIs; academic and non-academic support staff; those involved with admissions, VPE, retention and progression to employment; equality officers; staff and educational developers; and researchers.

## Overview of key evidence and issues

Dr Ruth Woodfield, University of Sussex

### Introduction

The gendered landscape of higher education (hereafter HE) has changed significantly over the past two decades. As has long been the case, men are more likely to secure graduate-level employment after their degree, although the advantage over women in this respect is now marginal. Men still form the majority of faculty and HE managers. Since the early 1990s, however, women are now more likely to start an undergraduate course than men, to successfully complete it and to achieve a 'good degree'<sup>1</sup>. Although the gender gap is less significant beyond undergraduate study, women are also more likely to undertake post-graduate courses. The speed and scale of the change in undergraduate participation patterns makes it a social phenomenon meriting further attention.

Higher education is accepted as conferring benefits on the recipient beyond those associated directly with degree-level learning, although this confers significant advantages itself (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 290). Further benefits include enhanced employability, earning potential, improved long-term health and well-being and an enhanced sense of citizenship (Bynner, Dolton, Feinstein, Makepeace, Malmberg & Woods 2003). The rationale for focusing on any disadvantage experienced in relation to HE is therefore widely accepted. There is some dispute, however, as to whether gender disadvantage exists, and if so, as to which gender is most affected. Until very recently, research attention focused almost exclusively on women – on their historical exclusion from universities, their subsequent marginalisation, and their experience of both explicit and implicit discrimination practices (Dyhouse 2006; Hall 1982; McCrum 1996). Current suggestions that attention should now focus on men's HE participation and performance have proved controversial (HEPI 2010). Those opposing this refocusing suggest that it fuels moral panic about women's HE progress, detracts from ongoing female disadvantages, and from a much larger socio-economic gap within the student body (Leathwood & Read 2009; Morley 2010). Those supporting a focus on men's HE participation predict a continuation of the broad gender trends in the future and the

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<sup>1</sup> A 'good' degree is one achieving either of the top two classifications – a 'First' or a '2:1'.

possible emergence of significant social consequences for boys, men and society more generally (HEPI 2009; Pirie 2001; Vincent-Lancrin 2008). It is, furthermore, sometimes assumed that the quantitative domination of HE by women equals the qualitative dominion of the sector by femininity and female interests, and that being quantitatively in a minority automatically renders men a *disadvantaged* minority<sup>2</sup>. The gender gap is also at times characterised as more uniform and stable than it is, and male and female disadvantage is presented as mutually exclusive (e.g. Pirie 2001).

The empirical exploration of this topic has been notably late but the picture that emerges from the available evidence suggests a varied and complex gender patterning. It is important to attend to this complexity and to recognize that men, women and HE are neither homogenous nor fixed entities. As Jacobs (1996) notes, issues of 'access, process, and outcomes are distinct aspects of higher education that need to be examined separately. The trends in these areas often do not coincide with one another, and consequently separate explanations of these facets of HE are needed' (177). Similarly, some groups of men may be more vulnerable than others with respect to experiencing disadvantage in terms of HE, men generally may experience advantage at certain points, and some groups of women may remain disadvantaged despite the overall picture. Moreover, many of the explanations provided in the research for the differences between men and women in relation to HE assume that factors outside the university context itself are primary drivers of the patterns we see emerging there. Such factors are key to understanding how and why gender patterns emerge. It is, nevertheless, also necessary to focus on the general and particular HE context, and to consider the impact of multiple factors at each distinct stage of the student lifecycle.

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2 Being positioned in the minority cannot automatically be taken as being simply positioned also within the disadvantaged group in any given context. For example, male primary school teachers are outnumbered by their female counterparts and may experience certain disadvantages associated with being in a gender-atypical profession, but they are over-represented within the senior management of schools, and so clearly experience advantage in other respects.

## Overview of the gender landscape in higher education

### Access to HE

Women are now more likely to attend university than men, and have been more likely to do so since 1992/3 (HEPI 2009). The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) estimated women's participation rate in 2008/9 across the 17-30 age range to be 51%, whilst men's was 40% (BIS 2010). Women currently make up nearly 57% of the entire student population (ECU 2010: 83) and similarly comprised 57% of graduates from first degrees in 2009 (HESA 2010a). Although they are more likely to study part-time than male students, they form the majority of both part-time and full-time undergraduate students (ECU 2010: 83). They also form the majority of post-graduate students, although here men are over-represented in full-time post-graduate courses (ECU 2010: 76).

Women make up the majority of mature students<sup>3</sup> and the gender gap between men and women is greatest above the age of 21 (BIS 2010; HEPI 2009). However, such students cannot fully account for the discrepancy between men and women's participation rates, as, for instance, they only comprise 26% of first-degree undergraduate students (ECU 2010: 127). During the past three years, the percentage of male students has increased slightly, from 42.5% to 43.1% (ECU 2010: 79; see also BIS 2010). Nevertheless, it has been estimated by some that the UK will have the second highest concentration of women in higher education by 2015 (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 271), and that, by 2025, women could outnumber men 2:1 here, and in several other OECD countries (266).

In the UK, the higher rates of participation for young women are sustained across different ethnic and social class groupings (Broeke & Nicholls 2007; HEPI 2009; Richardson 2007). However, it has been suggested that white working class men emerge as the least likely to enter HE, and, along with black Afro-Caribbean men, are the most disengaged from HE (EDA 2008). Indeed, a House of Commons report on widening participation claims that any participation increases among the lower classes is based almost entirely on girls and women (House of Commons 2008-9).

Overall, women are more likely than men to participate in courses across every type of HE institution, from post-1992 through to Russell Group universities

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3 'Mature' designates students over the age of 21 on entry to HE, whilst 'young' designates those under the age of 21 (HESA, Performance Indicators: *Definitions*, [www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk)).

(ECU 2010: 178; HEPI 2009). They are, however, more likely to study at, and graduate from, post-1992 universities than men. In 2009, 58% of women graduated from this institutional type as compared to 53.6% of men (HESA 2010a<sup>4</sup>). Furthermore, in the academic years 2003-2009, 38% of male students studied at either Russell Group or 1994 Group HEIs, as against 35% of female students.(ECU 2010: 160<sup>5</sup>).

Finally, men and women fall unevenly into different disciplinary areas within UK HE (HESA 2010b). Women first-degree undergraduates are more likely to take an arts subject; because of their overall numbers, however, they nevertheless make up just under half of science undergraduates and over 60% of arts graduates (HESA 2010a, 2010b; ECU 2010: 168–9). Although women are under-represented in Architecture, Building and Planning, Computer Science, Engineering and Technology, Physical Sciences and Maths, they form the majority of graduates from all other scientific disciplines and now dominate areas such as Veterinary Science (ECU 2010: 86; HESA 2010a).

### Retention

As well as having lower access to higher education, men who do begin undergraduate courses in the UK are less likely to complete them. Mature students are particularly vulnerable to non-completion (HESA 2010b: T3a). Seventeen per cent of mature men who start an undergraduate degree do not complete it, while 12.3% of mature women withdraw; for traditional-age entrants, 7.9% of men do not complete, against 6.5% of women (HEPI 2009: table 5). It is estimated that less than half of the difference in completion rates between men and women can be explained with reference to the different disciplines each tend to study (HEPI 2009), leaving much of the gap requiring alternative explanations.

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4 Bespoke data-set ref 43993 comprising 298, 238 UK and EU domiciled undergraduate students graduating from UK universities with a first degree and who had also completed the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey on their employment outcomes. All results displayed here are from subsequent analysis undertaken by Ruth Woodfield.

5 Table B7 data has been re-analysed. HEIs include all those members of the following affiliations: Russell Group; 1994 Group; University Alliance; Million+; GuildHE.

## Attainment

Of those who complete their degrees, men are also less likely to attain a 'good degree', with 59% of them doing so against 64% of women (HESA 2010b: T6; see also ECU 2010: 86). Although there is some variation in this pattern across disciplines, it is in evidence in the majority of them, including some traditionally associated with men and male skill-sets, such as the mathematical sciences, although the trend is stronger in the arts. The pattern is also evident across both pre-1992 and post-1992 HEIs (HESA 2010a). Men are, however, still more likely to obtain a First Class degree, although this trend has diminished steadily since the early 1990s (Woodfield and Earl-Novell 2006). Men are also more likely to achieve a classification at the lower end of the spectrum: 2:2s, 3rds, and passes (HESA 2010: T6; ECU 2010: 89). This overall gender gap in favour of women reflects the more general trend found 'at all levels of pupils' academic performance, in all types of school and for all social milieus, including the most disadvantaged ... [and which] appears to emerge more in adolescence between 11–16' (Vincent-Lancrin 2008: 284).

## Employment

Six months after graduating from their first degree, men are less likely to report having secured paid employment and are more likely to report being unemployed (HEPI 2009; HESA 2010: ref. 43993), and this has been noted as evidence of their disadvantage in relation to higher education (HEPI 2009). It remains the case, however, and despite the gendered patterning of attainment at this level, that men who do secure employment are marginally more likely to have secured graduate-level work<sup>6</sup> than comparable women – 65% of them do so as compared to 64% of women

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6 The categorisation of employment as 'graduate-level' or 'non-graduate-level' is decided here using the specifically designed classification system developed by Elias & Purcell (2004): Social Occupational Classification (Higher Education), (SOC(HE)). In this typology five distinct occupational groups are identified (4):

1. Traditional graduate occupations (e.g. solicitors, doctors).
2. Modern graduate occupations (e.g. IT professionals, teachers).
3. New graduate occupations (e.g. occupational therapists, management accountants).
4. Niche graduate occupations (e.g. planning engineers, hotel managers).
5. Non-graduate occupations.

(HESA 2010a). In some particularly male-dominated areas, such as computer science, women are far less likely than men to secure graduate-level employment, despite being more likely to leave university with a higher degree (Woodfield, 2011). Men are also more likely to achieve an above-average salary (Elias et al. 1999; HEPI 2009). Employed women graduates are also marginally less likely to secure full-time work – 73% as compared to 75% of men (HESA 2010a) – and this is the case with women in the general population (ONS 2009).

Women's participation in the academy at the level of faculty and management remains disproportionately lower than men's, and the pay-gap is comparable with the national pay gap (ECU 2010; Ledwith & Manfredi 2000).

## Reasons for the gender gaps in higher education

The current gender patterning of HE is usually explained with reference to several linked factors. They are: gendered cognitive differences; non-cognitive gender differences and gender trends in society generally; and educational practices, including those of HE.

### Gendered cognitive differences

Small gender differences in cognitive ability scores have emerged in many, although not all, tests on children throughout compulsory education. These differences generally show a slight superiority with respect to some literacy skills, as well as verbal and non-verbal reasoning, for girls, and a slight superiority with respect to numerical ability and scientific explanation for boys. Boys have also shown greater variation in cognitive ability test scores and academic assessments more generally, with girls showing more bunching around central scores (HEPI 2009; Machin & Pekkarinen 2008; McCrum 1994; Strand, Deary & Smith 2006).

Such differences have historically been claimed as the basis for greater male participation in HE generally, and men's greater dominance at the top end of degree awards, as well as in the lower degree classes (Goodhart 1988; McCrum 1994). With the move to a mass HE system, the patterning of cognitive differences is now suggested to be both the basis for women's greater participation and their achievement of more 'good' degrees on graduation. Following on from this, natural differences in cognitive abilities have also been used to explain why men dominate science disciplines and women the Arts (Holdstock 1998; Kimura 2006); such differences are therefore assumed to act as a barrier to more even attainment and degree choice patterns.

Both the existence of, and possible role played by, cognitive ability differences in the HE gender gap has been contested, however. Cross-national variations in test-scores point to their flexibility. Indeed, as Machin has pointed out, the gender gap in test scores can vary according to how gender-equal the country is more generally (2008: 1331). Vincent-Lancrin's review of the evidence concludes that 'neuro-scientific research has not as yet found any differences in the cognitive capacities of girls and boys' (2008: 287; see also DCSF 2007). As well as the unreliability of cognitive test scores *per se*, their capacity to produce existing gendered attainment patterns has also been disputed (Strand, Deary & Smith 2006). The fast-paced reversal of fortunes

for men and women in relation to HE challenges explanations that are over-reliant on relatively fixed, underlying differences. Furthermore, it is difficult to explain the discipline-specific variations in current gendered attainment patterns with reference to stable discrepancies in ability levels. Some disciplines at this level, Accounting and Finance and Business, for instance, manifest no clear relationship between gender and attainment (Paver and Gammie, 2005). Equally, stable, underlying differences would seem unable to explain why some disciplines have changed from being male to female-dominated very quickly, such as Veterinary Science. Indeed, the pace of some recent HE changes, and the international, institutional and disciplinary variations in the gender gap in HE, point to what Richardson has referred to as 'an intrinsically social phenomenon' (2004: 324), with social change-drivers that consequently can be addressed both generally but also within any specific HE context.

### Non-cognitive and behavioural gender differences

Some gender differences in non-cognitive traits have also been cited as key reasons for men's current position in HE. These include relatively fixed personality trait differences, and gender differences in terms of attitude and behaviour that are seen to have developed as a direct response to societal changes. In terms of measured personality traits, the 'Big Five' attributes, - 'Neuroticism', 'Extraversion', 'Openness to Experience', 'Agreeableness', and 'Conscientiousness'- have been found to form part of the explanation for women's achievement of higher degree results; this is especially the case for the latter three attributes (e.g. Farsides & Woodfield 2003, 2006). The exclusive role of fixed underlying traits in determining HE performance has been contested, however, and for the same reasons that the role of fixed cognitive differences has: because of variations in gendered patterns internationally, institutionally and at the level of discipline. Academic research has therefore also focused upon broad gender differences in behaviour predispositions towards learning environments that can explain differences in access motivation, as well as on-course experience and attainment.

It has been suggested, for instance, that the increased likelihood of accessing professional-level work for women has produced a new generation of female children with elevated academic commitment and HE aspirations; in most OECD countries 78.5% of girls aspire to this as compared to 68.4% boys (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008: 284-6). Studies have concluded that boys and young adult men are less likely than females to report liking school and university, or to embrace, enjoy and conform to the requirements of educational institutions (Connell 1989; Jacob 2002). The Labour

government's national strategy on gender and achievement noted boys' generally more challenging relationship to authority, academic work, formal achievement in a competitive environment, as well as their 'identification with concepts of masculinity which are frequently seen to be in direct conflict with the ethos of the school' (DofE 2010: [www.nationalstrategies](http://www.nationalstrategies)). It also concluded that boys identify key learning areas, such as literacy, as 'female' from an early age (DofE 2010). Conversely, girls are likely to operate with 'more effective learning strategies' (DofE 2010).

In the past, men's greater levels of non-conformity and higher-risk learning strategies was claimed partially to explain their greater participation in HE, especially at the more prestigious end, as well as their achievement of more Firsts (Mann 2001; Pirie 2001; Smithers 2003; Spurling 1990; Sutherland 1996). Women were counter-posed to this masculine style as relatively conscientious, consistent and risk-averse learners, and this was used to explain their lower achievement of Firsts (Leman 1999; Mann 2001; Martin 1997; McCrum 1996; Rudd 1984). Now, however, these alleged dispositional differences are argued to be partly responsible for the proportionately lower male participation in HE, as it is suggested that the HE landscape is currently less amenable to preferred male learning strategies, and that the move to a mass system has made male learning strategies more vulnerable to failure. Studies have concluded, for instance, that female students demonstrate 'a drive to perform to the best of their ability...whereas the males ... appeared to be happy to simply do enough to get by, allowing other aspects of their life to take priority' (Gammie, Paver, Gammie & Duncan 2003: 189), and that 'female more than male students were more likely to perceive that a greater level of effort was required' (Turner & Gibbs 2009: 696). More specifically, research has indicated that key barriers to the improvement of recent male undergraduate results have been their lower attendance rates in relation to taught sessions at university as compared to women, and their lower submission rates of non-contributory assessments, and their greater amounts of socializing (Hoffman & van den Berg 2000; Reisberg 2000; Wintre & Yaffe 2000; Woodfield, Jessop & McMillan 2006; Gammie et al. 2003; Sheard 2009). Gender differences have been found to exist in the US in attitudes to the opportunities and services that university offers beyond degree-level learning itself, indicating that male students were less aware of, and valued less highly, opportunities for self-development, such as careers counselling and out-of-class assistance, than female students (Whelchel 1998; Anastasia, Tremblay, Makela & Drennen 1999; Grebennikov & Skaines 2009).

## The wider social context

Broader societal changes have also been identified as part of the explanation for men's lower HE participation and success. As has been noted above, the increases in girls' academic aspirations have been linked to the greater opportunities they perceive to be afforded to women in the professional occupational sector. It is alleged that girls understand that the returns associated with gaining a degree will be very significant for them, and this includes working class girls (Archer, Pratt & Phillips 2001; Aimhigher Midlands 2007). Conversely, evidence suggests that boys might be equally, or indeed more, attracted to entering the world of work after the end of compulsory schooling, albeit not necessarily at a professional level (Cleary 2007; Connell, 1989). As with educational achievement, occupational achievement is more varied for boys – they tend to dominate jobs at the top and bottom of the Occupational Classification system<sup>7</sup>, whereas women now tend to be bunched in middle ranked jobs (Blackburn & Jarman 2006). It may be that some boys are less fixated on achieving a professional-level career due to their traditional association with working in general and with work that falls into all categories along the occupational ladder, and are therefore making employment decisions according to different success criteria than those currently being deployed by many girls and women. For instance, evidence suggests that a university course may be perceived to represent a greater risk, and a disruption to a solid, post-school work trajectory, for men than for women (Archer et al. 2001; Cleary 2007). Research also suggests that such considerations are more alive for working class than middle class boys, because the latter have historically perceived university as a natural step on their pathway to professional-level work whereas the former have not (Archer et al. 2001; Aimhigher Midlands 2007).

## Educational institutions and practices

Leading on from the above, the cultures and practices of all educational institutions have also been cited as key reasons for the falling participation and achievement rates of men in HE.

Early work exploring why some working class boys turn away from HE highlighted the 'hidden curriculum' of the compulsory educational system i.e. the tacit norms and values schools embrace and communicate to students independently

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7 SOC2000 [www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/classifications/archived/SOC2000/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/classifications/archived/SOC2000/index.html)

of the formal curriculum. It was claimed that the hidden curriculum supported the production of a particular kind of 'culturally-specific...class-specific' version of academic masculinity which continued into university and which many men, especially working class men, simply could not identify with (Connell 1989: 298; see also Willis 1977; Cleary 2007). This form of masculinity is associated with a type of 'desiccated' abstract, rational thinking that middle-class, privately educated men can more readily identify with. The suggestion that the education system, including tertiary education, has a particular, and exclusive, gender regime has been extended to claim that key elements of its cultures and practices are now 'feminised' (Pirie, 2001) and consequently better suited to girls' learning dispositions and interests. Much has been made in this context of the feminisation of the teaching profession at primary and secondary levels (Vincent-Lancrin: 287), and the generalised introduction of coursework and continuous assessments as core aspects of GCSE assessment in schools, colleges and HE. It is alleged that these assessment modes suit pupils who work consistently, whereas unseen examinations suit those who take more risks, approaches that mirror the assumed preferred working strategies of female and male learners (Chapman 1996; Marks 2001; Pirie 2001).

Historically the educational performance of girls and boys has always varied (HEPI 2009) insofar as girls out-performed boys on some assessments and vice-versa, and the comparative achievement of both boys and girls has been the focus of attention during various time periods. A clear gender-gap, with girls more generally out-stripping boys has emerged, however, since the late 1980s (HEPI 2009). The downturn in male participation rates in HE in the early 1990s closely followed the introduction of GCSEs in the UK in the late 1980s. The prior attainment pattern of boys and girls has been cited as a key contributory reason for their different success in relation to HE (Broecke et al. 2008; HEPI, 2009, 2010), with coursework specifically identified as enhancing girls' qualification profiles. It should be remembered, however, that girls' performance exceeded that of boys prior to GCSEs (DCSF 2007), and that the gender gap in education has occurred in countries without similar changes in assessment patterns (HEPI 2009). Moreover, ongoing reviews of boys' achievement have not confirmed that the effect of coursework is key at the secondary level (DCSF 2007).

The widespread introduction of coursework and continuous assessment within HE has also been identified by some as a key factor in women's current success in this sector. In the past, the focus on 'sudden death' unseen examinations was seen as a barrier to women improving their university attainment levels (Mann 2001; Martin 1997; McCrum 1996) and now coursework can be viewed as a barrier to male attainment

(Pirie 2001; HEPI 2009). Very little empirical research has been undertaken on the impact of coursework within the HE context, but that which has been undertaken indicates no clear preference or predisposition towards coursework or exams by either gender. Woodfield, Earl-Novell & Solomon (2006) found that male and female students reported a preference for coursework over unseen examinations, and that women's average scores on both modes of assessments were above those of men's. Gammie et al. (2003) reported no statistically significant differences between men and women in their performance on coursework versus examinations, in courses where their overall performance was equal.

A further area of research has highlighted structural factors producing different patterns of attainment between men and women in HE. This relates to disciplinary differences between the arts and sciences, and how they traditionally assess undergraduates. As the academic content of science degrees is more likely to be technical, and more easily assessed according to right/wrong criteria, it is claimed that the spread of grades in the sciences automatically falls across the entire classification spectrum, and therefore includes more Firsts and Fails (Mellanby et al. 2000; Smith & Naylor 2001; Surtees et al. 2002). In the arts, where marking criteria are less categorical, the spread of grades falls in a more bunched manner around the middle of the classification spectrum. Those who take arts degrees are therefore less likely to achieve a First but they are also more likely to achieve a 2:1 (ECU 2010: 170–171). The fact that men select science degrees more often than women do contributes both to their achievement of more Firsts, but also to their attainment of more less 'good degrees' (Woodfield & Earl-Novell 2006; ECU 2010: 170–171).

## Barriers and strategies for progression to higher education

Neil Raven, Aimhigher in the East Midlands

### Context

Females are more likely to attend higher education [HE] than males. As noted, this is a trend that can be traced back to the early 1990s. Indeed, evidence suggests the gender gap in progression to HE has widened in recent years. In 2002, 23,000 more females were accepted into HE than males; by 2009 this figure had risen to over 37,000<sup>8</sup>. However, sources also reveal significant differences in progression rates within the male population itself. Boys from poorer backgrounds are less likely to go on to HE than their wealthier counterparts. Indeed, they are also less likely to progress than females from the same backgrounds. In 2002, males comprised just over 46 per cent of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in HE; by 2008 this figure had fallen to 41.9 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

Although its origins date back two decades it is only recently that relatively low rates of male participation have gained general recognition. Thompson and Bekhradnia (2009) reference concerns raised by the Select Committee on Education and Skills in 2007 and note HEFCE's Council Briefing on '*Targeting Outreach*' of the same year (HEFCE, 2007a) which acknowledged 'sex inequality' to be 'an issue for widening participation'. The same commentators also observed the comparatively small amount of activity undertaken by Aimhigher to address this issue. Whilst not the only originator of such activity, as the government-funded initiative established to promote widening participation, Aimhigher is recognised as having a central role to play in such matters. Its original brief, with an emphasis on identifying those under-represented in HE by family background, ethnicity and disability rather than gender, may account for this neglect. However, in response to such calls, 2007 saw the launch of an Aimhigher programme dedicated to addressing the issue of working class male progression<sup>10</sup>. As a key component of this programme, those involved in

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8 Number of accepted UCAS applicants by gender, 2002 to 2009: all UK domiciled applicants, [www.ucas.com/about\\_us/stat\\_services/stats\\_online/annual\\_datasets\\_to\\_download/](http://www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/annual_datasets_to_download/)

9 Number of accepted UCAS applicants from low socio-economic backgrounds (NS-SEC 4-7) by gender, 2002 to 2008: all UK domiciled applicants, [www.ucas.com/about\\_us/stat\\_services/stats\\_online/annual\\_datasets\\_to\\_download](http://www.ucas.com/about_us/stat_services/stats_online/annual_datasets_to_download)

10 The Aimhigher East Midlands' Boys into HE programme.

widening participation [WPP] initiatives that had successfully engaged with boys were invited to submit profiles of their projects. The resulting repository of good practice can be found at: [www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=14\\_7](http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=14_7)<sup>11</sup>. For this paper 36 of these projects were examined<sup>12</sup>. What insights into strategies for overcoming barriers do they offer?

### Strategies

Between them these projects sought to address a range of barriers to progression. Key aims included:

- *influencing attitudes towards education.* Aimhigher Sussex's *A Suitable Boy* scheme was one example. Working with 30 disaffected year nine boys who were approaching their GCSEs, this scheme sought to 're-engage' them with their 'educational journeys'. This was achieved by encouraging the boys to explore role models and think about what they wanted to achieve with their lives, with attention then being turned to the role that education could play in this process.
- *raising HE aspirations.* This was the focus for a number of projects, to include *Striving for Excellence*, a project led by Bury College and involving 10 high schools along with the local university. This project aimed at addressing the decline in male HE applications in the local area by providing interactive workshops facilitated by a motivational speaker for 100 year 11 boys. The project also comprised a university-based event and a mentoring scheme.
- *improving attainment.* This was the objective of Aimhigher Greater Manchester's *Boys Writing Conference*. Based at Liverpool FC and catering for 30 year nine boys from the Wirral who were underachieving in English, the event involved workshops led by a professional author, a poet and a sports writer.

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11 Funded by HEFCE, Action on Access is the national co-ordination team for widening participation in higher education.

12 Representing the majority of case studies available and all those that provided descriptions of sufficient detail to permit analysis.

- *the provision of information about higher education.* The engineering summer school for 16–18 years olds run by London East Thames Gateway and City University was one such example. Although not exclusively for males, the majority of attendees were boys who, by participating in a series of interactive lectures and workshops, gained ‘a greater understanding of what it is like to study at university’.

However, in many of these schemes more than one objective was met, a feature that reflects the inter-connected nature of these strategies for improving outcomes. For instance, it was recognised that raising aspirations could lead to improvements in attainment through enhanced motivation. Indeed, a number of projects sought to offer a progressive set of interventions. This was the case with Aimhigher Derbyshire’s Boys into HE project, an initiative that worked with the same cohort over a three year period. Initially engaging the group in year eight, the scheme sought to nurture positive attitudes to education, as well as raise awareness of HE, before, in subsequent years, addressing attainment and HE aspirations. It is also evident that in many cases these schemes sought to build an on-going relationship with participants. Aimhigher Lancashire and the University of Central Lancaster’s *Raising Aspirations* project, which worked with young male Muslims and included a two-day residential along with an HE celebration event, equipped attendees with information about future open days and other HE-related events, as well as arranging for the provision of information on HE issues such as tuition fees.

From a consideration of their descriptions these case studies also reveal some of the likely reasons for their success in recruiting, engaging and influencing boys. It is noticeable, also, that many of these initiatives share features in common. These include:

- *careful targeting of participants.* Many projects adopted guidelines developed by Aimhigher which took account of academic potential (HEFCE 2007b). However, in identifying the most suitable candidates for the particular initiatives being proposed a number also consulted teachers along with the potential participants themselves. Beyond this, there was evidence of targeting reflecting specific project objectives. For instance, Blackpool Sixth Form College’s *Raising the Educational Aspirations of White Male Students* targeted those living in local areas of multi deprivation that had the potential to achieve five GCSEs but were not currently working at that level. Moreover, through the work of the college’s progression mentor, the project team was able to identify the barriers to achievement and progression faced by these individuals and build a scheme around their needs.

- *targeted/bespoke content and delivery.* A considerable amount of work and research was devoted to ensuring activities would be attractive to the intended beneficiaries. In many instances interventions were built around beneficiaries' existing interests. Aimhigher Derbyshire's dance and film project sought to engage young men through their interest in street culture, including break dancing, with the scheme utilising the local university's performance facilities. In addition, many of the projects were collaborative in nature. Aimhigher Greater Manchester's *More Than a Game* provided some 80 year nine boys with information and advice on career and HE opportunities related to sport by using guest speakers from Manchester City F.C. and Lancashire County Cricket Club. Another initiative that also worked with local partners, this time through visits to a motor racing circuit as well as football and rugby grounds, was Aimhigher Northamptonshire's *Man 2 Man* project. An additional common feature highlighted by this particular scheme was the involvement of parents and carers. In this instance the emphasis was on engaging with fathers as well as their sons.
  
- *involvement of key influencers.* Aimhigher Leicestershire's Boys into Football initiative worked with a number of local football clubs by employing university students as coaches and role models. Elsewhere, projects worked closely with teachers. Aimhigher Nottinghamshire's *Success for Boys* scheme not only offered interactive workshops designed to develop the emotional intelligence of male participants and encourage them to recognize the success that could come from learning, but also ran complementary workshops for teachers to help them develop techniques to motivate and inspire boys.
  
- *employment of male undergraduates, variously described as helpers, ambassadors and role models.* Aimhigher South West's *Boys into Health Care* event provides an example here. Targeted at 100 boys in years nine to 11, this event comprised a series of interactive workshops delivered by male healthcare practitioners and supported by male student ambassadors.

### Concluding comments

Whilst they undoubtedly offer a valuable resource, the projects captured in Aimhigher's repository of good practice can only reflect what was happening at the time of their submission. In some cases this dates back to 2007/8. It would be valuable, therefore, to

revisit these projects, initially to discover how they have evolved, given that in a number of cases references were made to planned developments. For example, the University of Birmingham's *Looking Forward to Aiming High* project, which, in partnership with the National Black Boys Can Association, worked with African Caribbean boys from lower socio-economic backgrounds on a range of activities, described planned developments in response to feedback from teachers and parents. Linked to this, the discussion has tended to consider these projects in isolation but consideration of how they align with other widening participation activities would be instructive, given that increasingly such interventions are considered within a framework of widening participation activities that recognizes different stages in a learner's development cycle?<sup>13</sup> Finally, revisiting would throw light on the longer-term impact of these initiatives. In this respect, many of the descriptions make reference to plans for tracking participants, as in Aimhigher Greater Manchester's *More Than a Game* initiative whose plans included the tracking of participants through to year 13.

In addition, given the impending closure of Aimhigher and requirements associated with access agreements, the question arises of the extent to which these initiatives have been, or are likely to become, embedded in institutional WWP provision. One example of early success in this respect was the *London Boys' Fashion Summer School*, co-ordinated by the University of the Arts and aimed at local working class boys studying art and design. But how many others have been taken on and what can be learned from their success in being adopted?

Finally, the local nature of these initiatives should not be overlooked. The descriptions show that these projects were responding to local challenges. From reading between the lines one also becomes aware that the success of such initiatives ultimately rests with the expertise of those 'on the ground' - the co-ordinators and outreach workers who submitted the project profiles. However, there is a risk that, unless fully recognised and utilised, the knowledge and expertise these individuals have acquired over a number of years could be easily and quietly lost.

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13 See the Higher Education Progression Framework which was developed in 2008 and provides guidance on introducing an 'integrated, sequential and progressive approach' to widening participation. *Higher Education Progression Framework. Final Report (Action on Access, June 2008)*, [http://www.actiononaccess.org/?p=19\\_1\\_2\\_2](http://www.actiononaccess.org/?p=19_1_2_2). In addition, work has recently been conducted on the development and evaluation of a Learner Progression Matrix. See 'Invitation to tender for action research of the application of the Progression Matrix', February 2011: [http://www.actiononaccess.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/progressionframeworkguide77.pdf](http://www.actiononaccess.org/wp-content/files_mf/progressionframeworkguide77.pdf)

## Barriers and strategies for retaining male students

Ed Foster and Ruth Lefever, Nottingham Trent University

### Introduction

One particular barrier that male students face to achievement in higher education is progression. As already noted, in the UK, male students are more likely to leave early when compared to females (NAO 2002, NAO 2007). However, there has been very little research to address the possible reasons for gender differences in retention despite the suggestion that less than half of this difference can be explained by choice of subject.

This section of the discussion paper is based on findings gathered by the HERE Project (Higher Education: Retention & Engagement). Between 2008 & 2011, three partner institutions - Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Bournemouth University (BU) and the University of Bradford (UoB) – conducted a research project as part of the HEFCE/Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded programme ‘What Works? Student Retention & Success’. Between March and May 2009, 873 first year students participated in a student transition survey to identify whether or not they had considered withdrawing from university. They were also asked to rate their actual university experience against 17 Student Experience Factors, for example ‘*I feel valued by teaching staff*’. Their progression was monitored at the start of the following academic year. For this discussion paper we have used the largest data set, that from NTU (656 students)<sup>14</sup>.

The research offers insights into gendered differences in the student experience and pointers to strategies for improving male retention based on a) evidence of the relationship between consideration of withdrawal and the students’ experience of university, particularly course-related factors, and b) evidence of what helped encourage doubters to stay. This gives pointers towards possible strategies for addressing male retention rates.

It may usefully be set in the wider context of the literature on student retention as synthesised in a Higher Education Academy publication ([www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/wprs/WPRS\\_retention\\_synthesis](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/inclusion/wprs/WPRS_retention_synthesis)). Referring to this body

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<sup>14</sup> Approximately 9% of the first year: 406 (62%) respondents were female and 250 (38%) male, the average age of both male and female respondents = 21.

of literature Jones *et al.* (2009) ([www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11\\_3\\_1](http://www.actiononaccess.org/index.php?p=11_3_1)), in the second of a series of briefings for the sector produced under the above Retention Grants Programme, point to the complexity of the inter-related reasons for withdrawal by individual students, which can be broadly summarised as relating to: preparation for transition to HE; institutional and course match; academic experience; social integration; financial issues; and personal circumstances.

### Potential barriers to male retention

As part of the transition survey, all students were asked to report their experiences of university across a range of 17 Student Experience Factors. In almost all categories, male students rated their experience more negatively - on average 5% lower. The one very striking exception is that male students appeared far more likely to recall having been told the differences between higher and earlier forms of education (Table 2). However, if they had heard the message, they appeared to be far less likely to have internalised the associated implications.

The two strongest differences between male and female responses related to effort put into studies. Male students appeared to be 18% less likely to be working 'hard' or 'very hard' (Table 2) and 18% less likely to be prioritising their academic studies (Table 3) than their female counterparts). Male students also appeared to be more distanced from, and less engaged with, the normal learning and teaching processes. For example, they were less likely to find their course interesting, their lecturers enthusiastic or be enjoying the course. They were also less likely to find their feedback useful. This was particularly significant as our findings suggest satisfaction with feedback relates directly to confidence about coping.

We were also struck by the male respondents' different degree of interaction with staff and peers. Male students were less likely to '*feel valued by staff*', and to agree that '*lecturers are accessible*' or that '*fellow students are supportive*' (Table 1). If male students have less well developed support mechanisms (from either staff or peers), this may partly explain why more male doubters actually leave than female doubters.

37% of survey respondents stated that they had considered withdrawing from their course at some point during the first year. The most common reasons for doubting related to the course: often anxieties about coping. 373 students granted us permission to monitor their progress. In December 2009, this group's progression was reviewed. 357 of the students were still at NTU, having progressed to the second year, transferred courses or repeated the first year and 16 had withdrawn (95.6% were

therefore still in higher education<sup>15</sup>). We describe those students who had considered leaving as doubters.

### The impact of gender on doubting and progression

Burrows (2010) noted that female students appeared more likely to have considered withdrawing when compared to their male peers. James, Krause & Jennings (2010) noted that female students are more likely to experience stress about coping with their studies. A similar pattern emerged in our research, with 41% of female respondents expressing doubts, whereas only 31% of males did so. When progress into the second year was monitored, 97% of female students had progressed whereas only 94% of males had. Therefore, males were 10% less likely to have doubts, yet twice as likely to have withdrawn as their female counterparts. Our initial analysis therefore suggested that, for males, doubting is a less useful predictor of early withdrawal than is the case with female students. It appears that female students may be more aware that they are experiencing problems, or perhaps perceive problems where male students do not. Given the increased likelihood of male students actually withdrawing, it appeared that male students were simply unaware that they were facing problems or at risk of failing. However, when we looked at the impact of male doubting on retention, a subtler picture emerged. Male students who are doubters are significantly more likely to withdraw than their non-doubting peers and the difference is much starker than is the case with female students. It appears that female students are more likely to doubt in the first place, but when faced with doubts appear better able to deal with whatever is causing their doubts. On the other hand, while male students are less likely to doubt, they are either more likely to be serious in their doubts about staying or are less able to deal with the causes of their doubting and therefore more likely to withdraw.

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15 At the time of writing, the most recent publically available progression data related to the year before (2007/08), this indicated that 91.6% of new students were still at NTU. These respondents therefore have a better-than-benchmark rate of progression.

## Possible strategies for improving male retention

In this light, the evidence gathered during the HERE Project suggests two broad strategies for improving retention:

1. Reduce the incidence of doubting in the first place;
2. Support doubters whilst they deal with their doubts.

We would suggest that both strategies also hold true for male students with the following considerations:

### Reducing the incidence of doubting in male students

It appears that the primary difference in behaviour is how hard male and female students are working. As male students report working less hard than females, we would suggest that they may benefit from being alerted to the potential risks of this approach early in the year. We would also suggest that formative assessments might be particularly beneficial. However, as male students also appear to find feedback less useful, we suggest that both the benefits and techniques of learning from feedback need to be more explicitly taught (Foster, McNeil & Lawther 2011).

Although males appear marginally more likely than females to know where to go for help (Table 1), they report being less likely to have a personal tutor, feeling less valued by staff, having less enthusiastic lecturers and receiving less useful feedback. This appears to suggest that, while they are aware that there is support available, their experience of support is poorer. In 2011, we repeated the transition survey with a new cohort of first year students. This time, male and female students reported similar responses about struggling to cope and subsequently asking for help. When reporting who they had asked for help, 69% of male and 68% of female respondents had spoken to an academic member of staff. There were similar responses to seeking help from friends and family, but female students appeared to have adopted a more-sophisticated help-seeking strategy and were more likely to seek out student services, academic support or help from course administrative staff. We therefore suggest that, particularly during the first year, academic staff need to be more explicit about explaining the support available to male students.

Whilst we would not suggest that personal tutoring is the answer to all problems, we do suggest that male students may particularly benefit from having a

clearly-defined point of contact. Moreover, early in the first year, staff ought to take the lead ensuring that male students attend tutorials rather than assuming that males possess the confidence or self-awareness to seek out help.

### Supporting male doubters

In the student transition survey, we asked all doubters to tell us what had helped them stay until that point. Male students provided fewer responses than their female peers, but for the most part the overall pattern was the same.

The most commonly cited reason related to support from *'friends and family'*, this was also the most common reason cited by female students. It is interesting to note that males stated that they are having an equally enjoyable social life compared to their female counterparts (Table 1). However, when asked about their priorities they appear to be putting significantly less effort into their *'social life at university'* and *'family'* than their female counterparts (Table 3) and slightly less likely to report having supportive peers. Elsewhere we have stressed the importance of friendship as a support mechanism for doubters; however, it appears that male students may not recognise or value friendships to the same extent as females. It may be that for male groups, work- or team-oriented language may be more appropriate. Whatever language is used, more structured opportunities for male students to create support mechanisms are likely to be beneficial. We would suggest strong emphasis on small group work during induction and the first term. We would also suggest that it should not be assumed that all male students will possess the skills or confidence to simply use these opportunities and create their own support systems. Instead, we suggest that supportive activities such as ice breakers and name badges should be widely used.

Male students were also more likely to report both the highly positive: *'adapting to university'*, and highly defensive reason: *'lack of options'* for deciding to stay than their female counterparts.

### Discussion

Overall, we would suggest that male students will benefit from many of the same support strategies as their female counterparts and that the primary focus of retention activities ought to be within the learning and teaching context. This appears to be supported by evidence from studies of withdrawn students. For example, Yorke & Longden (2008) report that 11 of the 12 most commonly-cited reasons for withdrawing

are course-related. Yorke and Longden's earlier work also suggests that male students are more likely to cite a 'lack of commitment to studying' as a reason to withdraw (Yorke & Longden, 2004, p 114).

Our data appears to suggest that there are differences in the way that male and female students approach their studies. Males appear to be less engaged with the academic community, or less prepared to admit being engaged. However, this does beg the question, 'why is it that male students *report* working less hard than their female counterparts?' Is this a cultural phenomenon, or does it reflect different disciplinary practices?

It may be, for example, that all students in a particular academic school report working less hard due to the manner of learning and teaching in that school, not because there are inherently gendered approaches to working hard. If male students are based in particular schools, then the approaches to study may reflect the discipline, not the sex of the respondents. We therefore analysed the responses from those schools with the highest proportion of male students, highest proportion of female students and with the most gender balance<sup>16</sup>. Students did appear to be influenced by the culture of the academic schools, but even so, male students tended to report working slightly less hard than the females in the same school.

In Spring 2011, the second transition survey was sent out to new first year students. Male and female students reported being motivated by similar factors, primarily an intrinsic interest in the subject and an enjoyable learning experience. However, once again the starkest difference between the sexes related to attitudes to working. This time we asked students to report on the importance of working hard to them: 67% of female students stated that it was 'very important' whereas only 47% of male students felt the same way. Ultimately, this appears to suggest that male students continue to adopt unrealistically confident, riskier strategies to academic success than their female counterparts.

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16 Some of these data sets were therefore very small (for example only four male students in the most female school) and so these results ought to be treated with a degree of caution.

## Barriers and strategies for attainment and progression

Dr Ruth Woodfield, University of Sussex

In the context of the statistical picture and research findings relating to attainment outlined above, the following questions arise: Which factors are clearly indicated as barriers to improved male attainment? What strategies exist, or should exist, to counter these barriers?

The strategies designed to support male access and retention that have been developed in many HEIs do not directly address the differential performance of men and women once at university, and parallel developments designed specifically to address comparative male under-attainment have not emerged to any significant degree. This reflects the general lack of focus on attainment differences between diverse social groups of any kind in the sector (Jacobs, Owen, Sergeant & Schostak, 2007), and is despite the fact that careful monitoring of attainment by students' background characteristics more generally has been identified as crucial in maximising engagement and achievement (Engle & Tinto 2008; Jacobs et al. 2008; Wimshurst & Allard 2008). Regardless of the comparatively high public profile of debates about gender and attainment, it would seem that this particular background characteristic receives less attention within the HE sector itself than others, such as ethnicity (Jacobs et al. 2007; ECU/HEA 2008).

One key barrier to addressing the attainment differential between men and women is, therefore, the lack of institution-specific information. Jacobs et al. (2007) surveyed 54 UK universities and found that 77% of returning institutions collected and analysed degree attainment data by gender, yet reported often-weak dissemination of this information and 'relatively little focus' on it. Moreover, institutions did not often use this analysis to further internal debate or to develop strategies designed to address the gender gap; initiatives addressing access and retention enjoyed higher profiles (3).

It is not surprising then that there is no evidence that information on attainment patterns is being widely analysed in HEIs in conjunction with information on both background characteristics, such as gender, and on-course student behaviour. The available research suggests that such analyses might be useful in providing an evidence base for strategy development, and for clarifying the relationship between degree outcome and gender per se and gender-linked behaviours.

An example of where such analysis might be useful is in relation to attendance at taught sessions. Many universities do not keep accurate attendance records in relation to such sessions. Given the evidence that lower overall commitment, engagement

and attendance can be strong factors explaining lower achievement (Lamdin 1996, 1998; Farsides & Woodfield 2003, 2006; Engle & Tinto 2008), and specifically male achievement (Woodfield et al. 2006), the importance of establishing accurate, local knowledge about attendance patterns and drivers, and their relationship to gender, would seem to be crucial. If HEIs identify gender gaps in relation to absenteeism, a range of strategies could be considered to address them: increasing attendance monitoring; attaching course credit to attendance; giving assessment feedback in person etc. Institutional data and research findings could be disseminated to students to encourage reflection on the relationship between gender, on-course behaviour and degree outcome. To date, this has tended to happen only on courses where students have been participants in academic research in this area (Gammie et al. 2003).

Similarly, local and detailed knowledge about assessment preferences and submission patterns would seem to be critical. Gammie et al. (2003: 189) found that, whilst male students could be less engaged with course assessments generally, they were:

... all very enthusiastic about their placement employment and put in a lot of effort as they wanted to get a good review assessment. This may seem contradictory as their placement assessment did not contribute in any way to their honours classification. However, the male students discussed how ambitious they were in relation to their careers and the fact that good placement performance was the first rung of their career, hence the motivation to perform to the best of their ability.

This research concludes that course-specific knowledge of such gender preferences and behavioural differences remains crucial to improve attainment for all:

Staff should be aware ... of particular facets of a course where gender differences exist, explore the reasons for the differential in performance and take appropriate action to ensure that each individual student is given the platform in which to maximize his/her potential. (193)

Indeed, researchers have concluded that robust monitoring practices need always to be accompanied by an institutional willingness to respond to the pedagogic and structural changes the resulting information points towards. Engle and Tinto (2008), in their work on low-income and first-generation US students, have stressed the importance of both monitoring attainment patterns, and of institutional responsiveness, especially in relation to provision of study skills improvement programmes beyond the core curriculum, as well academic and pastoral interventions to support vulnerable students when their progress falters. Such interventions work best when they are tailored to the specific needs of the student at risk: 'the closer the alignment, the more likely students will be able to translate the support into successful classroom performance (Engle & Tinto 2008:25).

The evidence suggests that they work best on a small-scale so that vulnerable students get to know each other and staff: 'face-to-face support was seen as of significance in raising attainment' (Jacobs et al. 2008: 32; see also Engle & Tinto 2008). Universities further need to generate 'an institutional culture that fosters student success' (Engle & Tinto 2008: 26) and to invest in 'professional development for faculty and staff, not only help them acquire a broader range of pedagogical skills, but also learn how to effectively use those skills with at-risk populations' (26; see also Grebennikov & Skaines 2009).

Again, there is currently minimal evidence of institutional commitment to these practices in relation to gender differences. Jacobs et al. (2008) reported that some: '[departments] plan to hold student focus groups and to undertake a review of ... learning and teaching to see if changes could be made to ameliorate male underperformance' (20), and the *Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Report* notes that a small number of HEIs have developed policies to support 'young men 'at risk' of disengagement' (ECU/HEA 2008: 3).

Another key barrier to addressing this particular attainment differential is the way the debate has been framed nationally and internationally. Difficulties are experienced by individuals and institutions attempting to engage with the discourse of relative male underachievement, whilst continuing to acknowledge persisting female disadvantage, and avoiding the stereotyping of both men or women students. Jacobs *et al.* (2008) concluded that a male 'deficit model' was particularly likely to be adopted in relation to analysing gendered attainment differences, especially in relation to working class men (38). This contrasted with assumptions made about attainment differences associated with other background characteristics - such as ethnicity - where the performance of comparatively under-achieving groups was more likely to be explained with reference to 'institutional processes and discrimination' (3). Some staff indicated an inability or unwillingness to countenance any female advantage in this context (32). They believed that 'the ways men and women study/approach examinations' and 'subject differences: e.g. between arts and sciences' were the most important reasons for the differential attainment of men and women both in HE generally and in their own institution (14). Whilst it is positive that HEI staff did not attribute observed gender differences in attainment to fixed or innate cognitive differences, they were attributing them to 'naturalised' (37) behavioural differences between men and women. As such, these observations did not translate into the identification of the gender gap as a problem that any one university could address. Additionally, it is concerning that observed disciplinary differences between the arts and sciences - for instance, the concentration of men and women in disciplinary areas that they are traditionally associated with and the more restricted use of the marking range within the arts - would seem to be taken for granted, rather than being identified as in need of change.

## Implications for policy and practice in HE

Dr Ruth Woodfield, University of Sussex

The available research evidence suggests that there are important attitudinal and behavioural differences between men and women before they access HE, but also once they are within a higher education context. These differences can affect decision-making in relation to committing to and successfully completing degree-level study, on-course experiences and eventual achievement outcomes. Education institutions can have a strong strategic and practical role to play in addressing elements of gendered behaviour that have undesirable outcomes for both men and women (Connell 1989: 301). Although the HE sector cannot take responsibility for addressing the wider gender order within the UK that such gendered behaviour is associated with, we can and should be addressing its influence and impact within the general HE context and within our own institutions and courses. Some trends in male behaviour that may lead to less desirable outcomes for some men within HE, and which can be tackled in this context, centre on a lower degree of engagement with teaching and learning, as well as the support services that are offered by universities.

In developing solutions to identified problems for men specifically within HE, we need to guard against using caricatures of 'typical' male and female behaviour and against adopting an over-simplified 'deficit model' (Jacobs et al., 2007) of men's comparatively weaker performance when compared with women's i.e. assuming the problem lies wholly with men themselves. The sector does, however, need to find a way to engage with a complex, sensitive and potentially difficult set of evidence and respond to it effectively. The key changes that would support improved male and female experience and performance are similar to those that support improved attainment of other vulnerable groups: effective, evidenced-based strategy and policy development; and investment in faculty and resources to deliver tailored interventions. These changes would maximise the chances of institutions enhancing all types of students' engagement and experience.

The importance of improving the collection and dissemination of information regarding gender differences is a recurring theme in the research. It seems clear that differences in attendance patterns, learning outcomes, preferred learning and assessment styles, and satisfaction rates, should be routinely monitored. Access to such data is a pre-requisite of engendering change in both staff and students. Evidence reviewed here suggests that if under-achieving male students are exposed to such

information, their awareness of the implications of problematic learning patterns, and limited learning aspirations, can be raised. It also suggests that staff are often ignorant of current gender patterns or frustrated in their efforts to build awareness within their institutions. Such information needs to be monitored at the sectoral, institutional and course level and to include information regarding the intersection of gender with other background factors, such as class, ethnicity and disability.

Improvements in the sector's evidence base on this topic will lead to better strategising and policy-development. Here it is suggested that institutional cultures need to undergo significant change in order to deliver teaching and support that will better equip and engage all students. Institutions need to provide leadership when developing responses to the differential outcomes for men and women, developing policies and disseminating information to support the move to a culture of success that promotes, monitors and acts across the institution and throughout the student lifecycle, and which provides a range of structured opportunities for engagement.

In this context it seems clear that HEIs should work with men to develop their capacity to successfully engage with their degree courses. Such capacity-building could include supporting better understanding of the HE learning experience: the need for balance between social and academic engagement; the value of academic development and pastoral support; and the importance of learning to use formative feedback. This should start as early as possible and include capacity-building initiatives with groups of school-aged boys. Again, the evidence suggests that the emphasis here should fall on developing relationships between key staff and students to better scaffold students' experiences generally, and to further support students facing particular difficulties. Early warning systems need to be in place to flag up students whose attendance and attainment rates suddenly deteriorate and adequate crisis management processes need to be in place to support students who are in danger of withdrawing for academic or personal reasons. It is clear that attracting and retaining students will be of paramount interest in the new financial landscape of HE, but differential attainment rates will undoubtedly also come under increasing scrutiny and HEIs need to also maintain a focus on this aspect of gender-differentiated experience.

However, the evidence points to the importance of flexibility in relation to institutional responses. Solutions developed in association with one undergraduate programme may not work in relation to another. Similarly, those developed with respect to one vulnerable group may not work in precisely the same way in relation to another. A further key recurring theme to emerge from the research reviewed here is the importance of targeted and bespoke responses to identified student difficulties

and challenges in relation to all aspects of the student experience e.g. course content, teaching and assessment style and pastoral support. A primary relationship for tackling challenges would seem to be small-group, or even individual, face-to-face contact. Students need to be able to readily identify points of contact in their departments and beyond. Staff need to be able to identify what is 'typical' behaviour for individual students, and when behaviour is atypical and concerning. This suggests greater resources may be required to support the maintenance of a strong base of stable, small-group staff-student interactions. It also points to the importance of ensuring that institutions recognise and reward examples of good practice in this regard, where these relationships are managed particularly effectively by faculty, administrative staff and others (e.g. student mentors). Excellence in building and maintaining such relationships within teaching and student support should be recognised in promotion criteria.

Aside from the ethical case for enhancing the student experience, the business case in the current and forthcoming economic framework is unassailable.

## Reflective questions

Professor Liz Thomas, Higher Education Academy  
and Dr Ruth Woodfield, University of Sussex

The following reflective questions are intended to assist institutions to critically review their approach to male student access, retention and attainment in higher education.

### Data collection and analysis

1. Do you collect data about male students' participation in pre-entry interventions, application and admission to your institution/faculty/department and courses, on-course retention and attainment and degree attainment in comparison to women?
2. Do you monitor and analyse by gender student attendance at some lectures, seminars, practicals or lab sessions?
3. Do you monitor and analyse by gender usage of student services such as the library and learning resources, personal tutoring, academic and professional development opportunities and pastoral support services?

### Developing male capacity to engage

4. Do you have any strategies to raise (male) student awareness and understanding about the expectations of higher education study, the learning and teaching environment and the value of academic development and support services?
5. Do you monitor engagement with such interventions and evaluate the impact of them on male students compared to female students?

### Providing opportunities that encourage men to engage

6. Do you use a range of learning and teaching strategies that promote engagement with peers and academic staff?
7. Do you offer a range of services providing academic development and student support to appeal to different students?
8. Do you offer pre- and post-entry opportunities that are intended to appeal to male interests?

9. Do you require students with poor attendance and/or low academic achievement to participate in follow up activity?

#### Encouraging effective practice

10. Do you ensure that information relating to gender differences with respect to access, engagement, retention and attainment is shared with those involved with teaching and support students?
11. Do you identify and share effective practice across the HEI?
12. Are staff who are enabling men to access and succeed in HE identified and rewarded?

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## Appendix – tables showing differences between male and female student respondents

Table I – Selection of Student Experience Factors

Student Experience Factors			
% of students who rated the experience positively (4/5 out of 5) (n=656)	Female responses	Male responses	% Difference ordered by largest to smallest
Lecturers are accessible	82	70	-12
I feel valued by teaching staff	72	60	-12
My family is supportive	87	79	-8
The feedback I receive about my work is useful	84	76	-8
My taught sessions (such as lectures and seminars) are interesting	83	76	-7
I like the house /flat/halls that I am living in	77	70	-7
I have enthusiastic lecturers teaching on my course	84	79	-5
My course is well organised	83	78	-5
I am confident that I will have enough money to complete my course	76	71	-5
My fellow students are supportive	70	65	-5
My subject is interesting	92	88	-4
The assessment on my course is what I expected it to be	70	66	-4
I feel confident that I can cope with my studies	83	80	-3
I have easy access to University resources (e.g. computers, library books that I need)	88	86	-2
Completing my degree will help me achieve future goals	89	88	-1
I have an enjoyable social life	73	73	0
I would know where to go within the University if I had a problem	68	69	+1
Average difference between male & female respondents	80	75	-5

Table 2 – Other factors

Other factors tested			
(again numbers indicate % of students who reported 4/5 out of 5) (n=656)	Female Students	Male Students	% Difference ordered by largest to smallest
How hard have you worked so far this year?	62	44	-18
Do you have a personal tutor (yes/no)?	57	46	-11
How much have you enjoyed your course so far?	72	66	-6
How difficult have you found your studies so far this year?	35	31	-4
Students aiming for 1st class degree by the time they graduate (yes/no)	54	54	0
Do you feel that you understand the differences between learning at university and earlier learning? (yes/no)?	93	95	+2
Students aiming for 1st class degree classification by the end of the first year (yes/no)?	26	29	+3
Since coming to university, has anyone at NTU explained the difference between learning at university and your prior learning? (yes/no)?	47	58	+11
Average difference	56	53	-3

Table 3 – Student Priorities

Student priorities			
(Students were asked to state level of focus in each of the areas below scale of 1-5, 1 = no focus at all, 5 = a lot of focus) (n=656)	% Female responses	% Male responses	% Difference ordered by largest to smallest
My academic studies	80	62	-18
Family	52	36	-16
Social life at University	49	34	-15
Friends from home	33	27	-6
Part-time work	25	20	-5
Volunteering and other community activities	13	8	-5
Average difference	42	32	-10
Overall average for all three sections	66	61	-5





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The Higher Education Academy  
Innovation Way  
York Science Park  
Heslington  
York YO10 5BR

01904 717500

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