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## FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PROFESSIONS

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*Many authors and policy makers assume that girls and women are a disadvantaged group in education. This was once true. By the 1990s, however, female students had not only caught up with males; on a number of indicators they had surpassed them. This success in overcoming disadvantage in higher education should transfer to overcoming some of the barriers encountered by women in the work force.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s women were significantly under-represented in the professions. There were 117,000 males aged 25-34 holding degree level qualifications in 1981 compared with 72,000 females (see Table 1). Over 20 per cent of these qualified women were not participating in the work force. Of those who were, many were concentrated in a few professions, notably teaching.

The women who had succeeded in fashioning successful careers in what are now called 'non-traditional areas', like medicine and the law, were regarded in the early 1980s as path-breaking pioneers. Their stories were gathered in anthologies which recounted the difficulties they faced in overcoming male prejudices and the problems of managing career and family commitments.<sup>1</sup> At the time, researchers in these fields 'pointed angrily to the continuing low level of involvement of women in science, the arts, medicine, law and other middle-class areas of employment and in public positions as evidence of sexism in a society which would not tolerate many women in prestigious positions of leadership and influence'.<sup>2</sup> Australia was thought to be particularly culpable.<sup>3</sup>

These perceptions helped fuel a vigorous reaction to the circumstances thought to have led to this situation. During the 1980s a body of literature was constructed describing and offering explanations for the sources of female disadvantage in higher education and the professions. The thrust of some of this literature was that powerful social and political forces were operating to inhibit female achievement, and that these forces would only be overcome with state intervention.

The poorer educational achievement of women was thought to be partly a matter of female socialisation. According to this perspective, the school curriculum and the wider culture were pervaded with images of

men as active, confident and career-oriented and women as the reverse. The message to women was that:

Boys do all the interesting things while girls, when they are not doing household chores, just fill in the background... Boys begin to extend their horizons, to grow in self-esteem. Girls, however, learn to reduce their expectations, to lower their self-esteem.<sup>4</sup>

Another related theme was that women were reluctant to compete at school for fear that this would compromise their feminine appeal. (For an example, see the account of Dr Patricia Brennan.<sup>5</sup>)

During the 1980s these themes were extended towards a focus on men as active agents in the process of female educational disadvantage. R. W. Connell is an influential exponent of this theory. He argues that male violence towards women, including rape and sexual harassment, helps sustain female subordination to the traditional gender order.<sup>6</sup> Theorists such as Connell link male oppression to an alleged narrowing of female options in school and work. This theme is now prominent in analysis such as the recent paper in the Department of Employment, Education and Training's (DEET) *Projects of National Significance* series, which states:

The nature and extent of sexual harassment in schools and classrooms is frightening... Girls learn that they should put up with it and boys learn that is acceptable behaviour for them to exhibit.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, evidence mounted that young women were doing better than expected in the competition for tertiary entrance. It became harder to claim that women were systematically oppressed and that their disadvantages needed to be redressed by state intervention. Nevertheless, advocacy on behalf of women has continued but its focus has narrowed to assertions that women are being confined to undergraduate

Table 1: Persons by qualification level (bachelor degrees or higher), labour force participation rate and unemployment rate, selected age groups by sex, 1981, 1986 and 1991

	Total persons with degree +	Degree + holders as % total persons in age-sex group	Persons with degrees		Persons without degrees	
			Participation rate	Unemployment rate	Participation rate	Unemployment rate
1991						
20-24 male	38,719	5.7	89.6	10.8	81.5	20.9
20-24 female	49,071	7.4	89.9	8.8	70.7	16.5
25-34 male	163,175	12.1	95.3	5.3	85.8	14.3
25-34 female	164,093	12.0	83.5	5.4	59.6	11.7
1986						
20-24 male	30,201	4.7	89.4	6.2	88.1	14.6
20-24 female	30,621	4.8	88.3	6.5	72.9	13.2
25-34 male	132,988	10.5	96.1	2.6	92.3	9.2
25-34 female	101,961	8.0	81.1	4.0	57.5	9.7
1981						
20-24 male	31,178	5.0	88.9	4.5	90.2	9.0
20-24 female	28,407	4.6	86.6	5.3	70.0	9.2
25-34 male	117,120	9.8	96.0	1.9	94.8	5.0
25-34 female	71,998	6.1	77.5	3.5	52.5	5.3

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics census data: 1981 Cross-classified Table 3; 1986 Cross-classified Table CX0015, 1991 Centre for Population and Urban Research, unpublished

studies and to more 'traditional fields' at this level. For example, the Government's 1990 policy statement on equity in higher education entitled *A Fair Chance for All* states that 'women are noticeably under-represented in higher degrees'.<sup>8</sup> The document suggests various reasons for women's participation in higher education being adversely affected, including factors such as 'lack of childcare, lack of science and mathematics background and lack of information on employment opportunities'.<sup>9</sup>

As to constraints on women entering certain undergraduate fields, another paper from DEET's Project of National Significance series, this time on female entry into commercial fields within higher education, claims that 'despite the apparent increase in retention rates in the school system, it seems that the nature of that participation has not greatly changed'.<sup>10</sup> The report asserts that 'despite dominating in school commerce subjects, females are under represented in Business and Commerce courses in universities'. In explaining this

the authors draw on theories of gender relations (including Connell's work) which emphasise the importance of female subordination in the gender order in shaping the alleged reluctance of young women to take on 'non-traditional' courses at university level.<sup>11</sup> According to Dr Marlene Goldsmith who chairs the Study Committee on Social Issues of the New South Wales Parliament, despite the increase in female participation in higher education, there are still barriers to women's access to the high status faculties. In her view the universities in 'NSW and Australia remain largely a pink-collar ghetto for female employment'.<sup>12</sup>

Most recently, a discussion paper prepared by the Commonwealth Government's Women in Science, Engineering and Technology Advisory Group, recommends a range of equal opportunity measures to redress female disadvantage in the science and technology fields. According to the Advisory Group:

[Women] run the risk of becoming an 'information poor' minority in a

technologically-powerful society where male technocrats in control of new forms of digital technology are also able to control wealth and form culture and politics.<sup>13</sup>

The evidence presented below shows that as quickly as advocates move the focus of their concern about female disadvantage to new (and ever narrowing) fields, the tide of female achievement overwhelms the assumptions on which the original advocacy was based.

#### THE STATE RESPONSE

The Australian government has given high priority to an 'Agenda for Women' guided in part from the Office of the Status of Women in the Prime Minister's Department. This agenda seeks to redress the factors responsible for the educational disadvantages women allegedly experience. In the schools there is a National Action Plan for the Education of Girls which has recently been reviewed and re-endorsed for the period from 1993 to 1997 by the Australian Education Council (consisting of representatives from the Commonwealth and State Governments). The Action Plan includes further analysis of the 'construction of gender' and action to eliminate sex-based harassment.<sup>14</sup> Curiously, the Council has not yet addressed any parallel questions about why boys are being outstripped by girls at the secondary school level (see Table 2).

In higher education, the Commonwealth government has, since 1990, directed universities to take action to facilitate female enrolment in fields where they are under represented. In its White Paper on Higher Education of 1988 the government committed itself to a long-term strategy for achieving equity in higher education. This involved an inquiry to identify those segments of the community deserving the 'disadvantaged' tag. The Government announced which groups fitted this category in 1990.<sup>15</sup> They included the following:

- People from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
- People from non-English-speaking backgrounds,
- People from rural and isolated areas,
- People with disabilities, and

Table 2: Apparent retention rates\* of secondary school students to years 10, 11, and 12, by sex, Australia, selected years (per cent)

Year	Year 10		Year 11		Year 12	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
1971	81.9	79.7	49.1	42.7	34.1	26.9
1976	86.5	86.7	51.4	52.6	34.6	35.3
1981	90.3	92.6	51.6	59.0	32.0	37.8
1986	93.2	95.1	65.7	70.9	45.6	52.1
1989	96.0	98.1	73.0	81.5	55.5	65.2
1990	97.1	99.3	76.4	84.8	58.3	69.9
1991	98.2	99.4	82.9	89.2	66.1	76.7
1992	98.5	99.6	85.1	90.7	72.5	82.0
1993	97.5	99.1	84.5	90.5	71.9	81.4

\* Apparent retention rates show the percentage of students who continued to years 10, 11 and 12 from their respective cohort groups at the commencement of their secondary schooling. Rates are based on mid-year full-time enrolments. Care should be taken in interpreting the results as factors such as migration and students repeating years have not been taken into account.

Source: *National Report on Schooling Australia 1993*

- Women, particularly in non-traditional courses and postgraduate study.
- For women (as well as the other designated categories), all universities have been required to establish institutional equity plans, including various targets, against which performance is monitored annually.
- But, as the following shows, much of the policy which depicts women in higher education as disadvantaged has been overtaken by reality.

#### FEMALE ACHIEVEMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

The proportions of women to all students who commenced higher education courses at the graduate and undergraduate level in 1994 are shown in Table 3. Females are doing far better than males, filling nearly 55 per cent of commencing enrolments. Even if undergraduate nursing enrolments are removed from the data, the female proportion is nearly 54 per cent. This advantage applies not just at the undergraduate level but also at the post-graduate level; one of the reputed last bastions of male advantage. Males do prevail in the small higher-degree-by-research category. But probably this will not hold for much longer, given the wave of young

women now moving through the higher education ranks.

The female advantage over males may actually be greater than Table 3 suggests, as there are fewer females in the relevant age cohorts from which these students were drawn. In 1991, girls made up 48.7 per cent of the total 15-19 year-old age group in Australia and males 51.3 per cent.

This achievement did not happen overnight. The most recent year in which more males than females commenced university studies was 1984. Since then the gap in favour of women has been slowly widening. Only part of this difference is because of the transfer of education in nursing from hospitals to universities. The proportion of women amongst commencing students continues to increase with the 54.7 per cent figure for 1994 being the highest level achieved to date.

Enrolment numbers are a blunt indicator of gender achievement. More important is the record of female entry to the fields which some commentators believe they are still being excluded from. Women do predominate

in the so-called traditional fields. As Table 4 shows, in 1994 they made up 68 per cent of commencing students in the arts and social sciences, 73 per cent in education, and 77 per cent in health. But with the exception of engineering, the days of female exclusion from other fields are gone. Female enrolments in law reached 48 per cent in 1994, and female enrolments in business and science have been steadily climbing over the past few years. By 1994 women made up over 44 per cent and 41 per cent of business and science commencing students, up from 41 per cent and 39 per cent respectively in 1990. Even in veterinary science, women now predominate, comprising 57 per cent of newly-enrolled students in 1994. Only in engineering and surveying do women constitute a small minority of these students (14 per cent).

Table 3: Higher education commencing enrolments by level and sex, 1994

Course level	Female	Male	Percentage female	Total	
				Number	Per cent
Higher degree by research	4,374	5,975	41.3	10,349	4.6
Other postgraduate	25,907	22,559	53.5	48,466	21.5
Undergraduate	89,153	69,923	56.0	159,076	70.6
Other	3,845	3,489	52.4	7,334	3.3
Total	123,279	101,946	54.7	225,225	100.0

Source: Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), Aggregated Data Sets, unpublished, 1994

Table 4: Higher education commencing enrolments by level, by field of study and percentage female, 1994

Broad field of study	Total number	Percentage of enrolled students who are female				Total
		Higher degree by research	Other postgraduate	Under-graduate	Other	
Agri., Animal Husbandry	4,567	35.1	35.1	38.3	13.8	37.4
Archit., Building	4,492	29.8	27.4	35.7	-	33.9
Arts, Human., Soc. Sci.	50,759	54.5	67.7	68.8	53.5	67.6
Bus., Admin., Eco.	47,013	32.4	35.8	47.5	47.1	44.0
Education	31,109	59.1	69.3	75.7	77.6	72.6
Engin., Surveying	15,029	16.2	13.5	13.6	19.2	13.8
Health	26,245	56.2	77.4	78.6	80.6	77.4
Law, Legal Studies	7,613	37.8	42.3	50.1	-	47.7
Science	32,465	34.0	35.2	43.0	31.4	41.1
Veterinary Science	432	43.4	43.3	62.1	-	57.2
Non Award	5,411				52.1	52.8
Total	225,225	41.3	53.5	56.0	52.4	54.7

Source: DEET, Aggregated Data Sets, unpublished, 1994

**WOMEN AND ENTRY TO ELITE UNIVERSITIES AND COURSES**

Another test of female achievement is women's success in entering the most prestigious universities and the most sought-after faculties. An examination of this question was undertaken to explore the gender outcome for students commencing undergraduate courses in 1994 in Australia's leading universities, and in medicine and law faculties. If males have not been able to maintain their traditional dominance in these institutions and fields, this is surely evidence of significant breaches in the foundation of male privilege within the gender order. Table 5 shows enrolment rates for men and women commencing undergraduate courses in the eight leading institutions for 1994. Historically, graduation from these institutions has opened a pathway into the nation's social, economic

**Table 5: Higher education undergraduate commencing enrolments by institution and sex, 1994**

Institution	Female	Male	Total	Percentage female
University of Sydney	4,054	2,868	6,922	58.6
University of Melbourne	3,873	3,189	7,062	54.8
Monash University	5,175	4,419	9,594	53.9
University of Tasmania	1,840	1,607	3,447	53.4
University of Queensland	3,397	2,979	6,376	53.3
University of NSW	2,834	2,671	5,505	51.5
University of WA	1,569	1,599	3,168	49.5
University of Adelaide	1,527	1,675	3,202	47.7
All other institutions*	64,884	48,916	113,800	57.0
Total	89,153	69,923	159,076	56.0

\* Only Victoria University of Technology (48.2%), University of Southern Queensland (47.3%) and Swinburne University of Technology (44.8%) enrolments were less than 50 per cent female. Source: DEET, Aggregated Data Sets, unpublished, 1994

and political elite. Women are more successful than males in winning places in six of these eight universities. In fact, there are

only five universities in Australia where female commencement numbers do not exceed males. These include Swinburne University of Technology, where the emphasis on engineering influences the outcome.

The story is similar with the entry to the medicine and law faculties. Table 6 summarises the gender balance of commencing enrolments at the universities offering courses in the fields of study of medicine and law in 1994. The overall rate of female participation in medicine is 48.2 per cent, which matches the proportion of women in the relevant age cohort. In the case of law, women now exceed men amongst commencing law students at all places

**Table 6: Higher education commencing enrolments by institution by medicine and law by percentage female, 1994**

Institution	Medicine		Law <sup>b</sup>	
	Commencing enrolments	Percentage female	Commencing enrolments	Percentage female
University of Sydney	189	47.6	84	54.8
University of Melbourne	227	46.7	48	56.2
Monash University	142	52.1	430	55.6
University of Tasmania	59	57.6	183	59.2
University of Queensland	244	49.2	72	47.2
University of NSW	191	43.5	409	46.7
University of WA	130	50.0	177	54.8
University of Adelaide	133	44.4	97	57.7
University of Newcastle	70	55.7	48	54.2
Flinders University*	9	22.2	104	55.8
Queensland Uni. of Tech.			448	51.3
Macquarie University			280	57.1
Aust. National University			273	59.3
Other institutions			1,154	54.5
Total	1,394	48.2	3,807	53.3

\* Flinders University did not have a 'normal' intake in first year medicine in 1994 because of changes to the structure of the course.

<sup>b</sup> Apparently low commencing numbers at some universities indicate that combined courses in law and other fields of study have been coded to that other field.

Source: DEET, Aggregated Data Sets, unpublished, 1994

other than the Universities of New South Wales and Queensland.

#### WOMEN AND CLASS AS FACTORS DETERMINING ENTRY TO HIGHER EDUCATION

It is well known that young people of working-class origin are disadvantaged in the competition for tertiary entry.<sup>16</sup> In this context, a good index of the significance of gender as a factor in determining equitable outcomes in the higher education system is the relative ability of working-class males and females in overcoming class disadvantage. This question was investigated by using the student's permanent home residence, classified by the socioeconomic status of their postcode, as an indicator of class background.<sup>17</sup> The 'low', 'medium' and 'high' socio-economic categories used in Table 7 equate to 25 per cent, 50 per cent and 25 per cent respectively of the Australian population, ranked according to their postcode.

From the results of this analysis, it appears that as far as entry to higher education is concerned, women hold the advantage across all classes and all locations. Even though low socio-economic status is a source of disadvantage in access to higher education, women from such a background do better, on average, than comparable men. This generalisation holds true for persons of low socio-economic background coming from urban, rural and isolated locations.

#### WOMEN AND THE PROFESSIONS

Recent studies indicate that women also perform better during their higher education studies than men.<sup>18</sup> Analyses of examination success in individual subjects among bachelor degree students indicate that women outperform men in virtually all areas of study except social sciences, in which men performed better, and health, in which the sexes performed equally well.

This means that women's success in gaining entry to higher education is amplified relative to men by the time they complete

Table 7: Higher education undergraduate commencing enrolments by sex and socio-economic status (SES) postcode group, 1994

Rural indicator <sup>a</sup>	SES group	Females	Males	Total	Percentage female
Rural	Low	6,303	4,542	10,845	58.1
	Medium	10,552	7,612	18,164	58.1
	High	437	348	785	55.7
	Total	17,292	12,502	29,794	58.0
Isolated	Low	975	635	1,610	60.6
	Medium	1,011	659	1,670	60.5
	High	466	321	787	59.2
	Total	2,452	1,615	4,067	60.3
Urban	Low	6,516	5,171	11,687	55.7
	Medium	26,807	20,228	47,035	57.0
	High	26,580	21,018	47,598	55.8
	Total	59,903	46,417	106,320	56.3
Unknown <sup>b</sup>		9,506	9,389	18,895	50.3
Total		89,153	69,923	159,076	56.0

<sup>a</sup> The rural indicator is based on the classification of Australian postcodes derived by the Department of Primary Industry and Energy. 'Urban' is defined as including cities with over 100,000 population, plus Darwin and Townsville.

<sup>b</sup> 'Unknown' are students for whom no Australian post code of permanent home residence is recorded, including overseas students.

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, unpublished

their courses. But what is the impact of women's success in gaining academic credentials on the gender balance of Australia's professional labour force?

The overall achievement of women can best be appreciated from Table 1, which shows the total number of males and females with tertiary qualifications (at the level of bachelor degree or higher) in 1981, 1986 and 1991 in the 20-24 and 25-34 year-old age categories. Some landmarks stand out. By 1986, there were more tertiary-qualified women in the age category 20-24 than men. By 1991 this progress had worked through to the 25-34 year-old category such that there were marginally more tertiary-qualified women than men in this age group too. Meanwhile, the increasing predominance of women within student ranks had, by 1991, produced a remarkable predominance of women with degree qualifications amongst

20-24 year olds. There were 49,071 women in this category compared with just 38,719 men. (Note that there are only 934 nursing qualifications included in these figures.)

Table 8 shows that this plurality of women was not limited to 'traditional fields'. By 1991, there were fractionally more female lawyers aged 20-24 than males. Only a decade earlier, in 1981, women made up just 35 per cent of the total number of legally-qualified persons aged 20-24 (see Table 8). This too, represents an advance of great significance since the legal profession has long been regarded as a male preserve, central to the running of our society. If there is a 'gender order' which males are motivated to protect, they appear to have failed to defend it. Women have also made spectacular advances in the proportion of those qualified in accounting and other business areas, and in dentistry and medicine. The only areas where they have yet to reach or exceed the levels of male enrolment are in computing science and engineering.

#### FEMALE WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION RATES IN THE PROFESSIONS

It is one thing to attain the formal professional qualifications necessary to enter the professions, and another to make the successful transition to professional employment. One often encounters assertions that women have difficulty putting their qualifications to work, because of conflicting family commitments, limited career aspirations, prejudice or mismatch between the predominantly arts/social science/ education qualifications which women hold and labour market demand in professional fields. All these assertions appear to be myths.

First, young professionally qualified women show a high attachment to the labour market. Total male and female labour-market participation rates amongst 20-24 year olds holding degree level qualifications or above are similar: 89.6 per cent and 89.9 per cent

**Table 8: Persons aged 20-24 years with bachelor degree or higher qualification, field of study by sex, 1991 (with selected 1981 figures in brackets)**

	Number with qualification in field		Gender proportion %	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Accounting	4,862 (2,497)	3,699 (886)	57 (74)	43 (26)
Other Business Admin.	3,534	3,851	48	52
Medicine	716 (1,223)	689 (841)	51 (59)	49 (41)
Nursing	60	874	6	94
Dental	155 (291)	117 (121)	57 (71)	43 (29)
Health	1,242	3,400	27	73
Education	2,459	9,788	20	80
Social Professional	5,569	14,139	28	72
Economics	2,743	1,872	59	41
Law	1,040 (1,384)	1,065 (730)	49 (65)	51 (35)
Natural Science	6,083	5,692	52	48
Computing Science	2,889	929	76	24
Engineering	5,100	619	89	11
Building Design	539	537	50	50
All others	1,729	1,800	49	51
Total	38,719 (31,177)	49,071 (28,407)	44 (52)	56 (48)

Sources: ABS Census 1981 Cross-classified Table 3; Centre for Population and Urban Research, unpublished 1991 census

respectively (see Table 9). This parallel is perhaps not surprising for younger persons, given that most women in the 20-24 age category would not yet have begun to raise families. The real test of their commitment to utilising their qualifications begins with the 25-34 year-old category since this is the peak period for childbirth. Table 1 indicates that the participation rate for 25-34 year old women does fall below the male level. While the rate for males increases to 95 per cent, the female rate declines to 83.5 per cent. Nevertheless this is not a major decline. It also appears that the rate is decreasing over

time, since a decade earlier, in 1981 it was 77.5 per cent. Furthermore, tertiary-trained women in the older age groups continue to participate in the labour market at high levels until they reach the 55-64 age category (see Table 10). These participation rates are far higher than those reported for women without degrees.

Second, tertiary-trained women aged 20-24 appear to have more success in finding work than their male counterparts, in that they report lower unemployment levels (8.8 per cent) than men (10.8 per cent). Though Table 9 indicates that unemployment rates fluctuate by field for both males and females, only in dentistry, health, computing science

and engineering do young women experience higher unemployment levels than men. But are highly-educated women finding work in the professions for which they have been trained? The last two columns of Table 9 show that young female graduates were nearly as successful as men in finding jobs in the administrative/managerial or professional occupations. The preceding two columns give the share of employed graduates of each sex who find work in the specific field in which they trained. The variations between fields of study probably reflect the degree of vocational focus of particular courses. While women lag behind men in gaining relevant employment in some fields, the differences

Table 9: Persons aged 20-24 years with bachelor degree or higher qualification, field of study by sex and labour force status and occupational group of those employed, 1991

	Labour force status				Percentage of employed persons employed in				
	Participation rate		Unemployment rate		Professional occupation specific to field of study		Any administrative, managerial or professional occupation		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Accounting	96.4	95.0	8.4	7.1	69	67	78	74	
Other Business Admin.	93.0	92.0	11.0	8.8	9*	11*	46	43	
Medicine	87.2	90.4	1.3	1.3	78	68	88	87	
Nursing	93.3	92.4	10.7	5.3	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	. <sup>b</sup>	
Dental	96.1	91.5	2.0	8.4	94	85	94	88	
Health	93.6	93.0	3.9	5.0	70	78	82	85	
Education	95.3	89.3	7.1	5.0	75	79	82	83	
Social Professional	85.6	86.7	16.7	12.7	1	4	46	42	
Economics	89.5	89.5	10.3	8.1	27	23	48	46	
Law	86.3	86.9	7.7	7.5	61	58	75	66	
Natural Science	80.7	83.2	12.8	10.3	20	22	59	58	
Computing Science	92.6	94.6	9.1	10.9	68	69	81	81	
Engineering	93.3	89.2	9.8	10.0	62	54	80	76	
Building Design	71.1	79.7	17.5	13.1	35	24	48	51	
All others	89.6	87.9	14.9	11.9	-	-	52	45	
Total	1991	89.6	89.9	10.8	8.8	-	-	66	61
	(1981)	(88.9)	(86.6)	(4.5)	(5.3)				

\* Percentage employed in administrative/managerial occupation

<sup>b</sup> Nursing is not reported here as it is classified as a para-professional occupation

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, unpublished 1991 census

**Table 10: Labour force participation rates by age and sex and qualification level, 1991**

Age	Total		Degree +		No degree +	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
20 to 24	86	75	90	90	86	74
25 to 34	92	65	95	84	91	63
35 to 44	92	70	97	84	91	68
45 to 54	87	63	96	86	86	61
55 to 64	63	26	77	56	63	25
65 plus	10	4	26	12	9	4

Source: Centre for Population and Urban Research, 1991 census, unpublished

are small, and do not support the notion that women experience any gender-related handicap in finding appropriate professional work.

There may still be grounds for concern about equal opportunity for women in the professions. But, if so, they lie in the area of pay, promotion and accommodation of women's childbearing responsibilities, and not at the point of preparation for and entry to the professions. For example, data from the 1991 census (Table 11) indicate that employed female graduates earn some 19 per cent less than their male counterparts. Some of this is attributable to higher rates of part-time work amongst women. In the case of the 25-34 year-age group, 64 per cent of employed women with degrees worked full time (defined as 35 or more hours per week) compared with 87 per cent of similarly qualified men.<sup>19</sup>

#### WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF WOMEN'S ACHIEVEMENT?

The obvious question in light of this catalogue of female achievement is how has it been accomplished. Perhaps the feminist movement, and the state actions to promote female equity that it prompted, have succeeded in wiping away the profound obstacles that theorists argued through the 1970s and 1980s impeded women's progress? Alternatively, these obstacles may have been exaggerated. No resolution of these questions is attempted here. However, women's pathway to this success can be identified. It is the experience of young women in the secondary school system.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that the foundation for contemporary female achievement in the higher education system stems from much higher female secondary-school retention and completion levels relative to those of males. These show no sign of changing. The implication is that, for the foreseeable future, women will continue to dominate the entry to the tertiary education level.

#### TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY COLLEGE TO POST-SECONDARY STUDY

It is necessary to go back twenty-four years to find a time when more boys completed year 12 than girls. In 1971, more boys than girls stayed until the last year of secondary school but, by 1976, the girls were equally as likely as boys to attend school to this level. (see Table 2.) From 1981 onwards, there was an increased likelihood for students of both sexes to remain at school longer. From 1989, for every hundred students of each sex starting secondary school, around ten more girls than boys remained at school to Year 12. In 1993, eighty-one per cent of girls and 72 per cent of boys who had started school five years earlier at Year 7 level were attending school at Year 12.

As would be expected, students from lower-class backgrounds tend to leave school earlier than do those from the middle or higher classes. But, within these class categories, girls from across the class spectrum stay on at school longer than boys. Completion rate data for 1993 indicate that 78 per cent of high socio-economic status (SES) girls completed Year 12 as compared to 69 per cent of high-SES boys. In the low-SES

**Table 11: Median income of Australian-born men and women aged 25-34 by selected occupations, 1991**

	Managerial/ administrative	Professional	Para- professional
Men	\$30,952	\$36,873	\$31,140
Women	\$25,005	\$29,770	\$25,977
Difference as % of male income	19.2	19.3	16.6

Source: Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, unpublished

Table 12: Destination of school leavers (aged 15-19) by type of tertiary institution attended<sup>a</sup> or labour force status, 1988, 1993 and 1994

	Attended school in					
	1987 Males	1992 Males	1993 Males	1987 Females	1992 Females	1993 Females
Attending tertiary education						
Higher education institution	24,200	26,000	25,600	25,700	31,900	41,600
TAFE/technical college	39,100	34,500	36,300	24,500	24,800	26,000
Other	900	2,800	1,500	7,400	9,600	6,900
Not attending tertiary education						
Employed	35,200	32,300	34,300	39,600	27,500	29,400
Unemployed	20,600	20,500	20,200	11,900	14,200	17,700
Not in labour force	4,600	4,400	5,700	5,700	5,700	6,200
TOTAL	124,600	120,400	123,500	114,800	113,800	127,800
Attending tertiary education (%)						
Higher education institution	19.4	21.6	20.7	22.4	28.0	32.6
TAFE/technical college	31.4	28.7	29.4	21.3	21.8	20.3
Other	0.7	2.3	1.2	6.4	8.4	5.4
Total	51.5	52.6	51.3	50.1	58.2	58.3
Not attending tertiary education (%)						
Employed	28.3	26.8	27.8	34.5	24.2	23.0
Unemployed	16.5	17.0	16.4	10.4	12.5	13.8
Not in labour force	3.7	3.7	4.6	5.0	5.0	4.9
Total (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

<sup>a</sup> includes full time and part time

Source: *National Report on Schooling Australia 1993*, Statistical Annex, Australian Bureau of Statistics: Transition from Education to Work, 1994 unpublished

group, only 54 per cent of boys completed Year 12, compared with 65 per cent of girls.<sup>20</sup> Once again, the evidence indicates that young women perform better than young men as far as educational achievement is concerned when other factors are held constant.

The far higher female secondary completion rates at the high-school level open the gate for later tertiary participation. During the 1980s, girls appeared to enter higher education at the same or lower rates than boys, relative to those who complete year 12.<sup>21</sup> Their advantage as a group in gaining tertiary entrance, derives from the much greater numbers who survive within the school system to this level. If there is to be any examination of male disadvantage, it will have to begin at the level of secondary education.

One objection to this argument may be that it fails to take account of male advantage in trade training. This is partially true. Table

12 shows that a much higher proportion of males leave school to take up training at technical colleges than females. But, when all forms of post-school education are taken into account, women still do much better than men. Moreover, the gap is widening.

Whereas the transition-rate from school to any type of post-secondary education for males has remained stable at around 52 per cent for the years 1987, 1992 and 1993 (see Table 12), the transition rate for females has risen from 50 per cent to 58 per cent. The main contributor is the striking increase in the proportion of women attending a higher education institute after leaving school. This has increased from 22.4 per cent to 32.6 per cent between 1987 and 1993.

#### CONCLUSION

A remarkable social change has occurred over the last decade. Not only are young

women out-performing young men in many aspects of higher education, but also a higher proportion of 20-24 year-old men lack any form of post-school qualification than females in this age group. Not surprisingly, the rate of unemployment and average length of unemployment episodes is higher for this age-group of men than women.<sup>22</sup>

Given the recent record of female achievement, there is no longer any reason for women to be considered as a disadvantaged group as regards access to higher education. Female participation and success rates out-strip those of their male counterparts. Why then, does the government continue to regard women as a 'disadvantaged' group? The Discussion Paper, *A Fair Chance for All*, acknowledged '...that disadvantaged groups within society often cannot be clearly defined or differentiated, and that there will be areas of overlap on an individual basis'.<sup>23</sup> The largest disadvantaged 'equity group' identified by DEET is that of women and, as such, it is the group most likely to overlap other groups. But the class and location data examined indicate that women are not distinctly 'disadvantaged' within these groups. On the contrary, when these factors are held constant women, on average, do better than males within these categories.

*A Fair Chance for All* states that 'the overall objective for equity in higher education is to ensure that Australians from all groups in society have the opportunity to participate successfully in higher education. This will be achieved by changing the balance of the student population to reflect more closely the composition of society as a whole'.<sup>24</sup> The preceding analysis suggests that, on the basis of recent higher education achievement, it is men who could be regarded as being members of a disadvantaged group.

The current emphasis on pressuring young women into the technological fields, some of which have high unemployment rates, does not make much sense. Young women appear to have made quite sensible career choice decisions, given their relative success in finding professional work. They may be better anticipating the way our economy is moving as regards job opportunities than some educational leaders. Perhaps more men ought to be encouraged to enter service-oriented professions.

There is a need for the accurate monitoring and reporting of the rapidly-occurring

changes in higher education to ensure effective and efficient targeting of resources. Reliance on analysis and theories that do not take account of recent change contributes to wastage of resources and has the potential to contribute to the formation of new inequities. As equity goals are achieved, resources need to be redirected.

Female achievement in higher education and the subsequent entry of young women into the professions will affect society at all levels. Now that women appear to be advancing beyond men in the attainment of key professional credentials, men (and women for that matter) are going to have to rethink lingering traditional notions concerned with male/female roles in the workplace and the home. Men are going to have to get used to the existence of many more senior women in the workplaces of the near future. The recent success which women have had in higher education and entry into the professions may see the 'glass ceiling', which some people claim is a barrier to the career advancement of many women, being pushed higher. One thing is plain. Any factors that impede women's advancement in the future are unlikely to stem from their lack of educational and professional qualifications.

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- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 28
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- <sup>15</sup> *A Fair Chance for All*, op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> B. Birrell, 'Competition for tertiary entrance: the Monash experience', *People and Place*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1994
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- <sup>20</sup> Australian Education Council, *National Report on Schooling*, Statistical Annex, 1993
- <sup>21</sup> Trevor Williams et al, *Entering Higher Education in the 1980s*, AGPS, Canberra, 1993, Chapter 3
- <sup>22</sup> See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Labour Force*, Catalogue No. 6203.0, November 1994, Table 27.
- <sup>23</sup> *A Fair Chance for All*, op. cit., p. v
- <sup>24</sup> *ibid*, p. 8

## TEMPORARY OVERSEAS WORKERS - DEREGULATING THE MARKET

### Martin Bell

*Temporary labour migration is the great sleeper in Australia's immigration debate. It is little publicised, poorly documented and largely undebated. A current Government inquiry proposes a massive liberalisation of entry criteria and procedures, matching similar moves on trade and capital flows. The proposals represent a fundamental shift in policy, and will reduce protection of the domestic labour market.*

A central impetus in Australian economic management over the past decade has been the opening up of the economy to international competition. Key features include the deregulation of financial markets, floating of the dollar, the reduction or removal of tariff barriers, encouragement of Foreign Direct Investment and, within Australia, micro-economic reform. This transformation has been triggered by the perceived need to secure Australia's place in an expanding global economy. Policy makers have made the implicit assumption that the short-term trauma of restructuring will be outweighed by the long-term benefits of a more efficient, competitive economy which will deliver higher economic growth and improved living standards. Reform to date has focused on facilitating trade and capital flows. Now entering the policy agenda is another of the economist's traditional factors of production: labour.

### THE IMMIGRATION CONTEXT

Although Australia's immigration program has long been the subject of political and public debate, discussion has focused almost exclusively on permanent settler flows. By comparison little attention has been given to temporary labour migration. Yet such

movements are already significant. During 1993-94, 88,100 visas were issued to temporary residents (TRs), of which 13,000 were to fill shortages of skilled labour.<sup>1</sup> These figures closely match the 69,800 settler arrivals, 12,800 of whom entered under the skill category of the immigration program.<sup>2</sup> At a global level, a number of authors argue that temporary labour migration, especially of highly skilled professionals, represents a major growth area for the future. Increased temporary movements across national borders are seen as an inevitable, and beneficial, concomitant of closer economic integration, allowing human capital to be deployed where it can be used most productively.<sup>3</sup> In Australia, the balance of objectives governing temporary entry has already shifted from simply meeting temporary labour shortages towards the promotion of economic growth.<sup>4</sup> Recent proposals emanating from an inquiry established by the Minister of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Senator Bolkus, represent a significant further liberalisation of the rules governing temporary entry.

### SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

The purpose of the inquiry is unambiguous. Its key objective is to recommend policy and