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# The big picture on men's (and boys') learning

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*This paper focuses on what is known internationally from research about some aspects of men's learning. It explores the similar and different factors that shape men's attitudes towards learning in diverse national and cultural contexts. It also identifies some possible parallels (and differences) between the experiences, participation and outcomes in education of men and boys. The paper proceeds to make a case for recognising and addressing the factors that affect gender parity in educational contexts, including Australia, in which several tertiary outcome measures tend to be skewed towards girls and women. The paper forms part of background research for Phase 1 (in several Anglophone nations) of a major international research project into men's learning in community settings that includes several Australian study sites.*

## Introduction

Gender parity, achieving 'the same proportion of girls and boys that enter and complete schooling' (Aikman & Unterhalter 2007: 2), is an ideal shared by most world nations. And yet school-based education is characterised by extensive gender inequalities in many world nations. This paper begins by recognising that the gender participation pendulum in schools, worldwide and on balance, remains stuck well towards boys. It takes up Jha and Kelleher's (2006: 10) argument that 'gender equality cannot be viewed in isolation from other forms of inequalities' that arguably exist in Australia. It also presupposes that gendered differences 'often get sharpened by other dimensions such as race, ethnicity, location, class and other social or economic groupings' (p.10) that arguably divide Australian and other societies.

An opening explanation is required to explain how this necessarily brief but complex paper is developed. After examining the diverse and complex gender disparities in upper school to vocational education and training transitions internationally, I tentatively identify gender segmentation (separate and different gender roles in the labour market) as one of several missing links. I also tentatively explore gender disparities in education and training (and possible remedies) in just one nation, Australia. My paper returns, in the Discussion, to caution against complacency in relation to evidence of gender inequity in some post-school and adult and community education (ACE) educational aspirations and outcomes in Australia.

In brief, my interest is in how today's men experienced learning at school, with the purpose of thinking about how these experiences might be improved for future men. My particular focus is on how men's attitudes towards lifelong learning appear to be shaped to cause what McGivney (2004: 55) describes as the 'significant and sometimes lasting impact on subsequent attitudes towards education and patterns of post-compulsory learning'. My argument is supported by evidence in McGivney's (1999, 2004) research in the UK, baldly

but accurately encapsulated in her 2004 book title, *Men earn, women learn*. My claim is that most Australian education systems, and particularly workplaces, are already highly gender-segmented. This gender segmentation remains likely, in 2010, to continue to place more men on unbroken, lifetime working trajectories and more women on broken, lifelong learning trajectories.

My recent and ongoing research interest, with colleagues, is what happens to men when the work 'treadmill' stops (Golding, Brown, Foley, Harvey & Gleeson 2007). While boys are briefly considered, the focus of my broader concern is not with gendered schooling *per se*. I consider it too simple and easy to blame education providers for mirroring and reproducing the existing, gender-segmented inequities in the community, families and workplaces. It is unrealistic to expect schools in Australia to single-handedly achieve gender equity while the workplace, families and community cannot.

My particular concern, beyond the scope of this paper, is with evidence of longer-term effects of gender-related outcomes from school on men's life outcomes and wellbeing (Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009). I share Jha and Kelleher's (2006: 56) argument that '… [b]oys' achievement, measured as either participation or performance, is the result of a complex interplay of forces; it is not a creation of school processes alone'. I also share their contention that solutions must lie beyond school spaces and facilities. The solutions '… have to include challenging established notions of gender roles, relations and stereotypes using all possible interventions inside and outside the school' (Jha & Kelleher 2006: 63).

## The big picture of gender inequality

### A brief look at gendered participation across nations

In the big picture, it is women and girls who are most excluded from education across the world. Aikman and Unterhalter (2007: 4) note:

> At a time of enormously expanded access to all levels of education, of high aspirations for political participation and huge growth of knowledge economies, 77 million children are still out of school, 57 per cent of whom are girls (UNESCO 2006: 30). Seven-hundred and eighty-one million adults are illiterate and 64 per cent of these are women (UNESCO 2006: 59). Nearly one billion people, one sixth of the world population, have little or no education. … Two thirds of these people are women and girls.

Another way of measuring participation is 'school life expectancy (SLE), representing the average number of years of schooling that individuals can expect to receive in different regions' (Jha & Kelleher 2006: 4). A global glance at SLE data points to some intriguing trends that cut across the big picture painted above. When these data were analysed by world region, Jha and Kelleher (2006: 4) concluded:

> … while SLE is higher for boys in sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and the Pacific and South and West Asia, it is higher for girls in Latin America and the Caribbean, North America and Western Europe.

A closer analysis by Jha and Kelleher (2006: 5) of all world regions by nation reveals that 'this trend in boys' under-participation is largely confined to areas that have experienced higher growth in educational attainment rates'. So why is it that countries that have achieved universal access and high participation rates for both boys and girls, at least to the primary age of schooling, are exhibiting gender disparities in favour of girls? In particular, what is the situation in Australia?

### A brief glimpse at gendered achievement and post-school outcomes in Australia

Australia has few obvious, statutory impediments or other factors limiting access to education and training by gender. The most obvious factors at school are likely to be student family background, location and cost. One might intuitively anticipate that these factors would operate similarly for boys' and girls' achievements and outcomes

at school. One might also expect, in an educational environment committed to gender equity, that schools might make a difference in flattening out existing, gender-related trends in achievement and post-school outcomes. In an ideal, inclusive and equitable education system, other existing inequalities, including socio-economic status of commencing students, might not be expected to be reproduced at exit. There is considerable evidence from Australia that many of these differences are reinforced and become intergenerational. Only two data sources are examined and discussed in this brief paper. One involves Australian school achievement data; the other involves post-school tertiary enrolment data from the Australian state of Victoria.

Jha and Kelleher (2006) examined case study data on boys' underachievement from four diverse nations including Australia. They examined and carefully dismissed some of the 'usual, simple suspects' in school gender analyses, including having male teachers and all-male classrooms (p. 64). They also dismissed some other factors likely to affect both genders, such as the paucity of qualified teachers and school places (p. 42), Jha and Kelleher identified three broad categories of factors as explanatory. Two categories of factors are seen to apply particularly to Australia. These are social, economic and occupational practices, as well as conformity to masculine gender identity and feminisation of schools. The third category, paucity of school places and facilities, arguably applies less generally to the Australian context. Jha and Kelleher (2006, p. 67) argue that '… [t]here is almost no gender disparity at primary school level in Australia'. Nevertheless, it is certainly a factor in some socio-economically disadvantaged, rural, remote and Australian Indigenous communities.

In establishing the national context for Jha and Kelleher's (2006) very limited Australian case study (of one government primary school in Queensland), PISA (2000–2006) data were examined on the ability to apply knowledge and skills to reading, mathematics

and science. The data, collected from Australian 15-year-old school students, identified no evidence of boys' underachievement in the latter, but differences for reading, 'though the level of difference was lower for Australia than most OECD countries' (p. 68). As in other countries, what was particularly striking was the way that '… socio-economic status compounds the difference between boys and girls in terms of their reading literacy' (p. 69). In Australia, 'boys from low socio-economic backgrounds were found to be almost twice as likely to be in the lowest quarter of reading literacy results than girls from similar backgrounds'. Having identified that '… [t]he environment outside school appears to play an important role in building reading literacy', Jha and Kelleher (2006: 69) concluded that in Australia, the overlapping effects of socio-economic status and the different socialisation of boys and girls were the main, explanatory factors in the gender differences in PISA scores. While they concluded that '[s]chools can play a role in changing this, … it is not clear to what extent they can make a difference' (p. 71).

There is other evidence, from the state of Victoria, Australia, of significantly gendered transitions for post-compulsory 18 year olds in both the Melbourne (capital city) region and each of Victoria's ten non-metropolitan education regions. The data on tertiary (university and TAFE [technical and further education]) enrolments in Victoria for 2006 (VTAC & ABS 2007) by Australian Bureau of Statistics Statistical Division (SD) show that in the Melbourne SD, 80.4 per cent of girls enrolled in tertiary study in 2006, compared with 62 per cent of boys. In the Wimmera SD (north western Victoria) it was 46.3 per cent for girls and 23.4 per cent for boys; in the Gippsland SD (south eastern Victoria), it was 41 per cent and 21.1 per cent. In summary, the likelihood of students enrolling in tertiary study in rural regions is around one half of that of students in Melbourne. When university-only enrolment outcome data are examined by gender for the same SD's, the same general trends are evident: male 18-year-olds in rural areas are again approximately one half as likely to enrol at university

as the same female cohort. Even where access to university was less likely to affect enrolment in metropolitan Melbourne, male 18-year-old university enrolment was only 75 per cent of female enrolment.

Responding to these data in relation to young country student enrolments, the Victorian National Party Leader, effectively representing a country political constituency, is quoted in *The Weekly Times* (2007) as saying that 'the problem reflected the impact of the drought, their desire to help the family and get out into the workforce.' However location aside, the other, concerning conclusion in all Victorian regions is that the likelihood of 18-year-old boys enrolling in a tertiary course is between three quarters to one half of the likelihood of girls of the same age. Why is there a university and vocational education and training (VET) enrolment 'drought' of young men in a nation where there is universal access and high participation rates for both boys and girls in secondary schools? Why are young, rural women in Victoria twice as likely to make the trip to attend a regional or city TAFE or university? Are similar trends in tertiary participation observed elsewhere, and for what reasons?

## The international data on gender

The international data on post-school transitions are difficult to measure meaningfully and compare, largely because data are collected in somewhat different ways across a wide range of school and post-compulsory sectors in diverse nations, cultures and labour markets. Within this brief paper, the scope for examining all post-compulsory pathways by gender is limited. For this reason, only VET (vocational education and training) outcomes (called TVET: Technical and Vocational Education and Training programs in the international literature) will be considered, and then, because of brevity and complexity, only superficially. Despite the complexity and measurement issues, it is important to examine (and debunk) some of the myths about the simplicity of numerical gender inequity in

participation by sector, and particularly the idea that there are simple, education-based solutions to addressing it.

The long and complex, statistical argument mounted in UNEVOC (2008) about gender disparity in TVET, summarised below, is presented as a salutary lesson for two reasons. Firstly, even with the best data in the world on the phenomena, there is no simple or general, international relationship between gender parity at school or post-school outcomes, that can be simply extrapolated to Australia. Secondly, it is important to understand that the gender inequity obvious in the Victorian tertiary enrolment data above are more likely to be explained and solved by circumstances and actions in sites beyond schools in Australia. These sites particularly include the family, community and work, where most learning, including about gender roles, arguably occurs informally (Golding, Foley & Brown 2008).

UNEVOC (2008) undertook an analysis by gender of the best available international TVET data from 162 countries. While they grimly concluded that the provision of TVET reaches only a small part of the school age population globally, they observed that the picture 'is even grimmer for girls' (p.34). They looked specifically at TVET enrolment by gender at the upper secondary level, by firstly plotting a Gender Parity Index (GPI) for each of these countries. GPI (UNEVOC 2008: 77) is defined as a measure of the ratio of the female-to-male values of a given indicator, against the percentage of the upper secondary enrolment. A GPI of unity would indicate parity between sexes (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2006: 183). A GPI above 1.3 would usually be regarded as an indicator of gender disparity (UNEVOC 2008: 59). The results are shown by nation in Figure 1. In nations where access to secondary education was most limited, the gender equalities in TVET were high, leading UNEVOC to hypothesise that the greater a country's percentage of TVET at the upper secondary level, the greater would be its GPI.

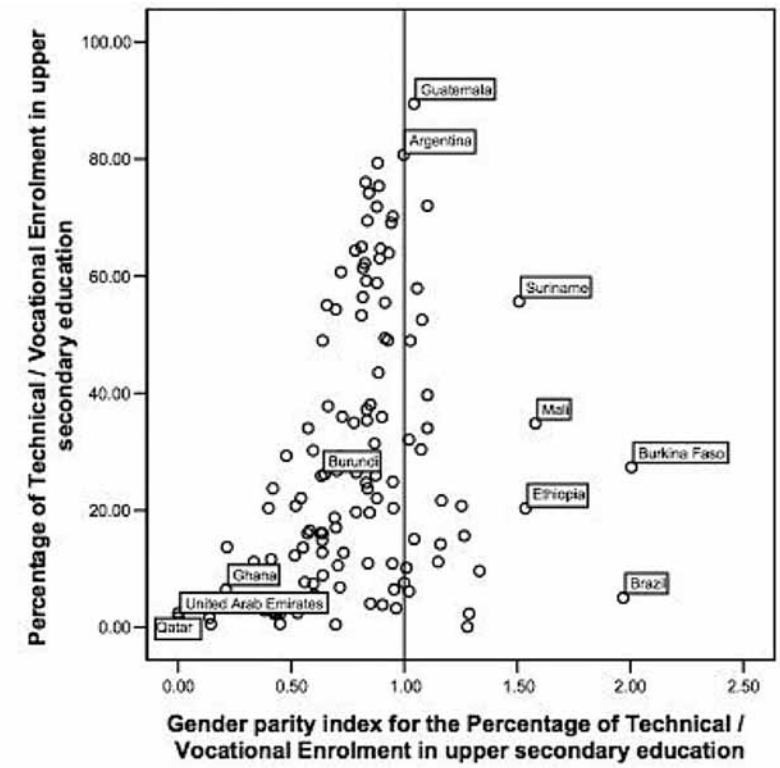


*Figure 1: Percentage of Technical/Vocational Education Enrolment in upper secondary education, by Gender Parity Index, 2002*
(from UNEVOC 2008, Figure 14, p.60; Data Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2005)

Figure 1 revealed some high GPIs (for nations such as Brazil and Burkina Faso, on the right of the graph), with a low percentage of enrolments in TVET that ran counter to their hypothesis. They therefore created and graphed a new measure, Transformed Gender Parity Index (TGPI) by nation, as shown in Figure 2. In their words,

For the Transformed Gender Parity Index, where the Gender Parity Index is higher than 1, the usual female-to-male formula is, in effect, inverted (UNEVOC 2008: 77) to male-to-female (UNESCO 2004b, p. 241). As a result, the upper boundary for TGPI becomes 1, which represents perfect gender parity. A TGPI below 0.97 indicates disparity either in favour of males *or* females (UNEVOC 2008: 77).

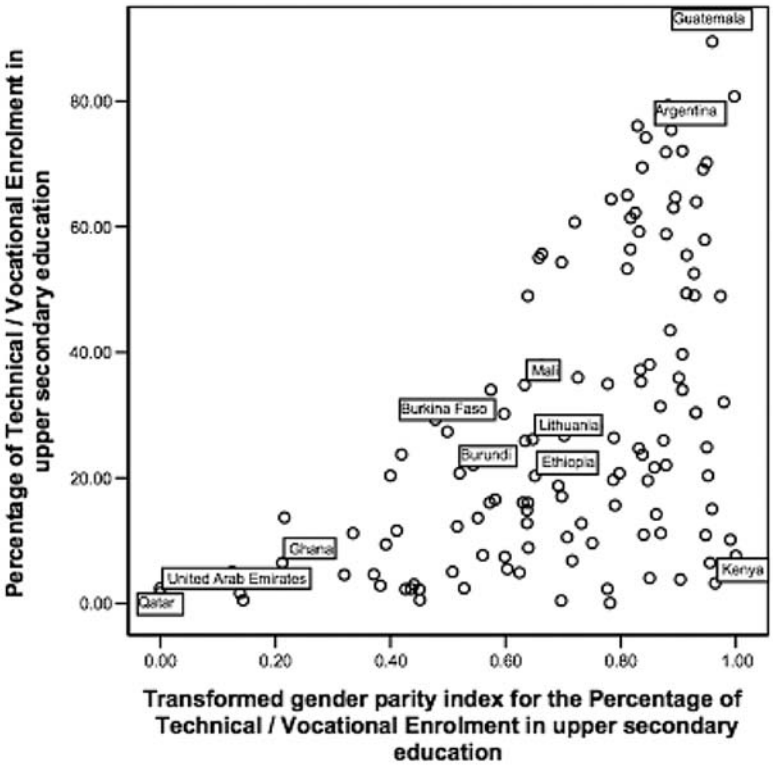


*Figure 2: Transformed gender parity index for the Percentage of Technical/Vocational Education Enrolment in upper secondary education, by Gender Parity Index, 2002*
(from UNEVOC 2008, Figure 15, p.61; Data Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2005)

On the basis of an analysis of the data in Figure 2, UNEVOC (2008) concluded that *any* gender disparity, regardless of whether it was males or females that were outnumbered, hindered TVET expansion.

UNEVOC's (2008) final gender analysis in Figure 3 brings us closest to data that might (or might not) inform or help explain the gendered nature of the Australian situation, approximated by Victorian tertiary enrolment data. They plotted the percentage of technical/vocational enrolment against the respective Gender Parity Indices, to provide a visual representation of a possible association between the gendered nature of secondary and TVET participation. UNEVOC, in effect, looked to see whether and how gender disparity in upper secondary levels might (or might not) be related to gender disparity at the same levels in TVET.

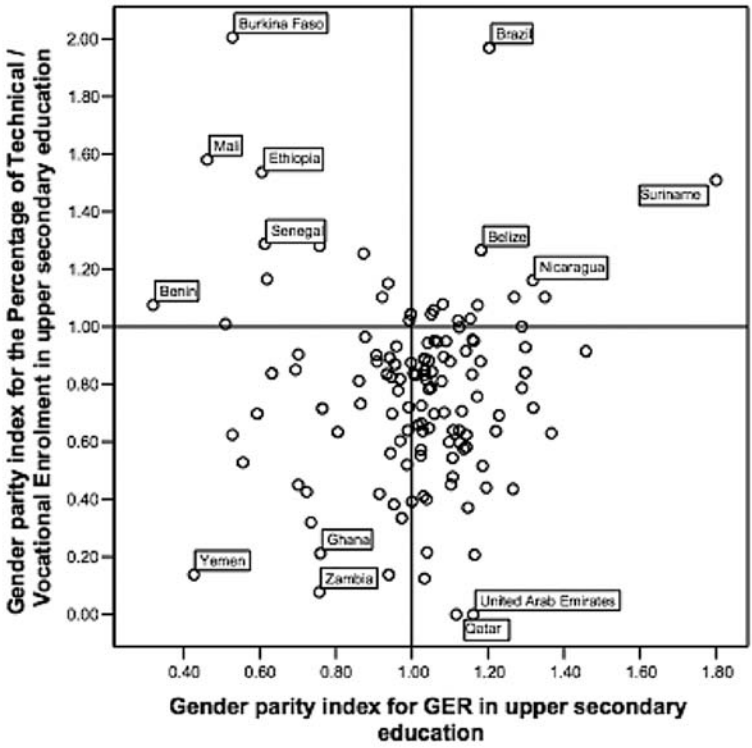


*Figure 3: Gender parity index for the Percentage of Technical/ Vocational Education Enrolment in upper secondary education, by the Gender Parity Index for the total Gross Enrolment Ratio, 2002*
(from UNEVOC 2008, Figure 16, p.62; Data Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2005)

Gender equity in both sectors would produce a clustering around the centre of Figure 3. If gender disparities at school were consistently translated into similar gender disparities in TVET, one might expect a direct, approximately linear relationship, with most values plotting in the NE and SW quadrants. Plots away from the centre of the graph in the SE quadrant would indicate more boys at school and less in TVET, with the reverse being the case in the NW quadrant.

Figure 3, with its scattered plots across all four quadrants, identified no general relationship. Relevant to the Australian situation, they found that gender parity in upper secondary education was not necessarily related to gender parity in TVET. They concluded that 'the relationship between gender and TVET [enrolment] is shown to be complex and likely to vary considerably across regions and countries' (UVEVOC 2008: 63).

## Discussion

UNEVOC's (2008) complex but systematic numeric analysis of school and TVET participation by gender, outlined above, was unable to identify a general, inter-sectoral, international trend. However, by focusing only on a sub-set of Commonwealth nations including Australia, where boys tended to under-perform in higher levels of school, Jha and Kelleher (2006: 43) concluded that …

> Conformity to 'masculine' gender identity that clashes with the demands of so-called feminized 'education' emerges as the most important and common reason given to explain underperformance of boys in general … Despite minor and sometimes major differences in these notions across different societies, certain aspects of what define masculinity and femininity appear to be fairly universal. Men are universally viewed as warriors and protectors and women as care givers. …. 'Not being feminine' assumes special importance when one tries to trace the relationship between masculinity and boys' underachievement in education.

My own conclusion, complemented by my research into men's learning research in Victoria (Golding & Rogers 2002; Golding, Harvey & Echter 2004), is that the significant gender disparities observed amongst Victorian 18-year-old tertiary student enrolments might also apply to many (but not all) Australian men locked into 'a dominant form of [hegemonic] masculinity: the measure by which all men are judged, the cultural idealized form of masculine

character that embodies male power' (Crawford 2002: 5), that include toughness, competitiveness, determination and self-sufficiency. This form of hegemonic masculinity, for many 18-year-old men from lower socio-economic backgrounds, presumably promises more immediate gratification of power and prestige from earning and work (and release from lack of success and prestige at school) rather than gratification from more learning. The nature of men and masculinities, as Hearn, Muller, Oleksy *et al.* (2003: 95) observe, is now less likely to be taken-for-granted and more likely to be subject to academic and policy debates including in education '... in more explicit, more gendered, more varied and sometimes more critical ways'. Until quite recently '[g]ender was largely seen as a matter of and by women; men were generally seen as ungendered, natural or naturalized' (p.95).

> Not only are men increasingly recognized as gendered, but they, or rather some men, are increasingly recognized as a gendered social problem to which welfare systems may, or for a variety of reasons may not, respond (Hearn, Muller, Oleksy *et al.* 2003: 96).

Instead of getting more education, Hearn, Muller, Oleksy *et al.* (2003: 103) conclude that in many areas of Europe,

> ... some young men become marginalized from work and family life. Working class men are considered most vulnerable. There is a lack of attention to men engaged in creating and reproducing social exclusion.

As McGivney (2004: 130) concluded in the United Kingdom, increasing male participation and addressing social exclusion goes well beyond the practical and cultural barriers. It is also '... a matter of overcoming widespread indifference and lack of interest arising from the perception that learning is of no use or relevance to them'. McGivney suggests that it will take '... a lot of convincing that participating will have practical pay-offs and will not stigmatise them

in the eyes of their male peers' (p. 130). The convincing process faces some significant hurdles, not the least of which are data, from both the United Kingdom and Australia, that confirm that many young men are right: 'qualifications do not always make a great deal of difference to a person's earnings', many jobs require no qualifications and many employees hold qualifications 'higher than those actually required for their jobs' (McGivney 2004: 131).

Reverting instead to a taken-for-granted 'discourse of naturalism', that 'boys will be boys' and that 'girls are just naturally the more civilized half of humanity' (Allard 2004: 359), is a slippery and deterministic, but alternative, conceptual slope. It would call '… into question the role of agency and choice for teachers and students' (p. 359). Allard's alternative proposal is to acknowledge that '… boys will be the boys they *choose* to be *on the basis of the discursive* positions offered to them' (p. 359, Allard's italics).

Attempts have been made in recent decades, in all post-compulsory education sectors in Australia, particularly in adult and community education, to ensure that women have been able to redress educational disadvantage experienced as girls. As Jha and Kelleher (2006: 43) observed:

> Education has been and is seen as a means of attaining other rights for women and education is itself viewed as an achievement. As such, one of the factors that explain the better performance of girls is the sense of accomplishment that is attached to education for women.

Part of that sense of accomplishment has come from women entering traditionally 'men's subjects' or men's professions'. However, as Jha and Kelleher (2006: 44) observe, the opposite is not the case for boys and men. Since masculinity continues to be associated with 'not being feminine', some activities considered 'feminine', arguably including learning and education but also including nursing, welfare, aged and

child care, are considered not masculine enough. This explanation is particularly powerful in Australia when the masculinities associated with rurality and lower socio-economic status are factored in.

An in-progress international study of learning in community contexts, that includes twelve sites across four Australian states (Golding, Brown, Foley & Harvey 2009; Golding, Foley, Brown & Harvey 2009) gives us some of the answers. One of the findings in our research is that men tend not to be as involved as adult, enrolled students in education (particularly in adult and community education). However, many men are learning what they need to elsewhere, in sites where learning is less formal and hands-on: particularly where learning, work-like experiences and masculinity can go hand-in-hand. One such site is through paid work and work-related training. The other such site is in social, community and voluntary activities and organisations that are more likely to be construed as masculine. Pedagogies which work for men in Australia include sporting organisations, fire and emergency services organisations, and very recently for some older men, community men's sheds.

## Conclusion

The drought of young men undertaking learning post-school in Australia is likely to persist until all post-compulsory education sectors, fields of study and professions recognise and address the extent of the change that might be required. My contention is that there is significant gender segmentation and gender blindness, in pedagogy and practice, in both work and education in Australia. Australia, based on OECD statistics, has one of the most highly gender segmented labour forces in the world: '[I]ndustries and occupations in Australia remain highly gender segregated and women's work is still undervalued' (HREOC 2008: 69). It may well be that the need for women to learn more than men post-school is related to their need to have a broader range of range of vocational and occupational

skills than men, to take up work '… which accommodates their family caring responsibilities' (HREOC 2008: 69), instead of work 'which fully rewards their skills and experiences'. Anyone involved in the fields and professions of health, welfare, retail, hospitality and education (particularly pre-school, primary and adult education) knows that there is a drought of men in these tertiary courses and professions, and that hairdressing aside, men are much more likely to go into a hands-on trade.

I also conclude that there is a need for caution against complacency in relation to Australian national educational aspirations and goals on a number of other worrying, and arguably related, educational measurement benchmarks. These benchmarks include, but go beyond, gender inequity in adult and community education. Australia, as a recent OECD (2008) report showed, is one of a handful of nations that has forced tertiary students to take on more of the costs. The neo-liberal message, from state and national governments in Australia, is clear and consistent. Learning that is not work-related, in any post-compulsory sector, is a personal and unnecessary luxury. Learners will either pay or do subsidised, accredited, workplace training. Australian adult and community education (ACE) beyond tertiary institutions and private providers at neighborhood level to 2009 is, with some exceptions, in a weak and fragmented state. It now has little or no coverage in most parts of rural Australia outside of Victoria, and has a highly feminised workforce, catering mainly for women as learners.

The typical explanation of gendered disparities in work generally, including in ACE, is that female-gendered sectors are insecure, poorly paid and part-time compared with male professions and trades. 'Women in Australia bear primary responsibility for managing family life [that] does not fit easily with the structure of the workplace' (HREOC 2005: 13), while 'men typically bear the

greatest responsibility for financially providing for their families'. To the extent that this is true, it may be timely to consider how wage and professional parity might be achieved. There is an argument that a so-called 'knowledge society' in Australia, where one third of adults are functionally illiterate and where educational achievement has most to do with where you are born, desperately needs a properly funded, national adult education sector similar to the systems in place in Scandinavia. Aikman and Unterhaleter (2007) identify a general national neglect of the adult basic education sector, despite its critical role in addressing gender equality for women and men in diverse countries:

> Governments state that they are committed to adult basic education—but in reality they are a low priority for most. Adult basic education has remained under-funded and marginalized within ministries, resulting in poor cohesion and coordination. Current government neglect of the sector needs to be reversed (p. 44).

Australian ACE might then be lifted in parity from a struggling and benevolent charity in a handful of states, to a properly supported and funded sector that promotes lifelong and lifewide learning for all. Beyond that unlikely prospect lies the need for a better understanding and a fundamental reform of gendered service provision for all adults. The task of education cannot all be laid at the feet of schools. The most recent tertiary enrolment data from Victoria suggest an urgent need in Australia to provide pedagogies and learning contexts that match the needs of people with identities (including masculinities) other than those tolerated at school. This particularly applies to those adult male identities associated with rurality and lower socio-economic status.

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