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The Chair – Andrew Norton

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Women are becoming the dominant sex in universities thanks to rising enrolments but perhaps men have nothing to worry about, writes ***Andrew Norton.***

OVER the past half century Australian higher education has been feminised. In the years after World War II, only about one in five university students were women. But in the mid-1950s the proportion of university places going to women began increasing, with this trend interrupted only a couple of times in the following decades.

In 2010, 58 per cent of domestic students were women, though men had regained a very small proportion of the total since 2009. But statistics on applications for university entry in 2011 showed that 59 per cent of them were from women, so the male enrolment share recovery may be short-lived. The causes of this gender imbalance are at least partly in the school years. Girls are significantly more likely than boys to finish school, and therefore meet the basic entry criteria for most university courses. For as long as that continues, a gender imbalance on university campuses is inevitable.

But applications statistics also show another factor driving the feminisation of universities. At the higher levels of school achievement, with Australian Tertiary Admission Ranks above 70, males and females are equally likely to apply for a university place. But with ATARs of 70 or below, females are more likely than males to apply.

As enrolment caps on Commonwealth-supported places have eased over the past few years, the fastest enrolment growth has been from applicants with ATARs below 70. Since 2004, the number of school leavers going to university on a below 70 ATAR has doubled. The above 70 ATAR students have increased by less than 20 per cent.

While acceptance statistics are not published by sex, this pattern of growth favours the women with below 70 ATARs who put in an application. From next year, almost all limits on Commonwealth-supported places at public universities will be lifted. This too is likely to favour women, and push up the female share of commencing students — perhaps past 60 per cent for the first time.

Noting the long-term trend in male enrolments, a 2002 report to the government recommended making men an "equity" group in fields of study with male enrolment shares below 40 per cent. Those fields of study included teaching, nursing, and arts. But the government of the day did not act on the report, and the issue of male university enrolments has struggled for attention. Is this because it does not matter?

University equity policy is based on the idea that enrolment shares by the various equity characteristics should roughly match their share of the total population. However, if enrolment patterns largely reflect different patterns of choices, rather than opportunities denied, then gender differences are not so concerning.

Though men have lost enrolment share in universities, they have gained enrolment share in the vocational sector. By their late 20s, women are only slightly more likely than men to have gained a qualification at certificate III level or above.

In the labour market, an upper-level vocational qualification provides as much insurance against unemployment as a degree. And though average incomes for people with vocational qualifications are lower than for university graduates, both groups vary a lot in their earnings. At the time of the 2006 census, the median bachelor degree arts graduate had about the same weekly income as the median holder of a certificate III or IV vocational qualification. And as very high wages in the mining industry suggest, it is possible to make a lot of money without a university degree.

The high-paying jobs needing vocational qualifications often require physical strength and tolerance for unpleasant working conditions, aspects of employment that discourage more women than men. By contrast, university qualifications typically lead to inside work that often requires interpersonal skills, aspects of employment that tend to attract women more than men. Over the past decade, strong overall enrolment increases in traditionally female health and education courses help explain women's growing university enrolment share.

It would be good if young men had better school results, and the additional course and career options those would bring. But for their overall life chances, the declining share of male university enrolments may not be as bad as it first appears.

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