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## **When the majority doesn't rule**

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Is it a problem that six out of seven engineering students are male, while only one in five teaching students is male, asks Andrew Harvey

Sometimes the majority doesn't rule. A look at the overall picture of higher education suggests female students are dominant. About 58 per cent of students starting at Australian universities are women. Female students form a majority of two-thirds on regional campuses and even a majority at the Group of Eight universities. Perhaps surprisingly, women also now form a majority of commencing PhD students. Assumptions that women only enrol at undergraduate level or at low-status universities are not supported by evidence.

Yet while women form an overall majority of the student cohort, there remain significant differences by discipline. About 85 per cent of university engineering students are male, along with more than 70 per cent of IT students. By contrast, about 80 per cent of primary teaching students are female, as are more than 70 per cent of health students. Men study finance, agriculture and computer science, while women study nursing, teaching and humanities. Men study physics; women study biology. Despite occasional government intervention to redress gender imbalances – for example, through identifying women in non-traditional areas as an equity group – patterns of participation in higher education remain highly gendered.

Is it a problem that six out of seven engineering students are male, while only one in five teaching students is male? The undergraduate course profile impacts upon research output, workforce productivity and social inclusion. Gendered course enrolments partly explain the very low regional male participation rate, and they partly explain the continuing paucity of women in senior academic and management roles. There are manifest reasons for making gender balance an objective of higher education.

Policy responses could be employed to tackle this problem. Previous research has noted the advantages of identifying both men and women in non-traditional areas as equity groups. The goal of gender parity could involve affirmative action and scholarships to encourage men into teaching and women into IT degrees, for example. Such a policy could lift the gender debate beyond a zero-sum game.

Nevertheless, the Commonwealth is more likely to be a facilitator than a direct agent of change. Indeed, the government has recently provided universities with a unique opportunity. The Commonwealth Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) explicitly allocates funds to universities to build partnerships, particularly with schools. The

strengthening of university-school partnerships provides an opportunity for staff and researchers to explore the factors that drive boys and girls to such different career paths from an early age.

Of course, individual research studies have already found clear differences in levels of educational engagement. The work of Professor Nola Alloway at James Cook University, for example, reveals many regional boys think university is regimented, dull and repetitive: just like school. Expectations of parents also differ considerably depending on the gender of their child. And OECD studies reveal boys perform better at science, and girls at reading, from an early age. Attitudes and performance clearly drive subsequent subject selections and motivations to study.

Through the HEPPP funding, universities can now explore the particular motivations of boys and girls within a select group of partner schools. University access pathways, campus familiarisation models, and parental engagement strategies can all be evaluated for their effectiveness by gender and other demographic criteria. Projects can generate research findings about the context in which boys and girls make different academic choices, and these findings can inform the way universities promote their courses to different audiences, including parents.

For higher education, a multi-faceted approach is clearly required to redress the gender divide across many disciplines. Working with schools could be an important part of that approach. Ultimately, the factors that influence student choice from an early age are connected to the quest for gender balance across the university.

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