

# Boys will be boys: The educational underachievement of boys and young men

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With a Foreword by Mary Curnock Cook



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## Acknowledgements

The two authors would like to thank the following people in particular for their comments on draft versions of this paper: Alison Allden; Alex Blower; Mary Curnock Cook; Julia Goodfellow; Chris Husbands; Sally Mapstone; Susan Morgan; Richard Reeves; Sheila Riddell; and HEPI colleagues. However, all opinions expressed and any errors of fact are the responsibility of the authors alone.

## Foreword

### Mary Curnock Cook CBE

#### **Chair of the Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology and of Pearson Education Ltd and formerly Chief Executive of UCAS**

If we want to advance equality between the sexes, we need to educate men as well as women. That is why ignoring the worsening gulf between education outcomes for boys and young men compared to their female peers is no longer an option. It is depressing to read here that, nine years on from HEPI's seminal *Boys to Men* report, nothing consequential has happened. Successive governments have stood by and fudged the issue by saying that *all* disadvantage is important to them.

A little mental arithmetic might help policymakers understand that improvements for any large group will make large improvements to the whole picture. It is instructive to compare the gap in higher education entry rates between men and women with the other big gap, that between students from relatively poorer and more affluent households. A decade ago, the participation gap between young people from the three lower IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) quintiles and *all* young men was around 7 percentage points. Since 2020, that gap has vanished and poorer students and young men have had around the same chance of entering university. If recent trends continue, then in a decade's time, you could expect to see young men 7-to-8 percentage points less likely to go to higher education than young people from poorer backgrounds – a reversal of the position ten years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Educational attainment gaps between rich and poor or north and south, for example, are intuitively easy to understand. We understand that deficits in social capital caused by poverty or generational scarring in post-industrial regions will likely impact young people's educational outcomes. But gaps for boys and girls are more perplexing because these children have been brought up in the same families and communities, they go to the same schools and have the same curriculum and the same teachers. Something has surely gone wrong with education if boys – in aggregate at least – do worse than girls at all stages of education from early years to higher education and beyond, as this report sets out.

But does it really matter if, despite underperformance in school and university, men go on to do better than women in the workplace? It soon will because the gender pay gap has halved to 7% for full-time workers over the past 20 years and continues to decline fast, especially for younger workers. This argument is rapidly losing any last shreds of credibility.<sup>2</sup>

In families where both parents work, women are more likely to provide childcare and spend more time on it than men on any given day of the week and this is a major hurdle for gender equality in the workplace.<sup>3</sup> If it is to become normalised for men to share home and family life equally with their partners, we need enlightened employers and cultural shifts so that men are not stigmatised if they request different working hours so they can pick up children from school, or if they actually take the Shared Parental Leave they are entitled to (apparently, just 5% of employee fathers do).<sup>4</sup> Societal norms are changing with both men and women wanting to play more equal roles at home and work. Yet such shifts will not happen if we are content with lower educational outcomes for men. As Charlotte Ivers put it recently in *The Times*:

*Young men have experienced a quite astonishing reversal of relative fortunes. And let's get this out of the way: it is not great. Sure, it's excellent that young women are thriving. But young men are going backwards. Someone should do something about this, on a policy level.*<sup>5</sup>

Men with no qualifications are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as women with no qualifications but there is virtually no gender gap in unemployment rates for people who have two A-Levels or equivalent. If these poorly qualified men are employed, they are more likely to work in hazardous, menial or dead-end roles. This makes men less likely to look after their mental and physical health, leading to higher substance abuse, smoking and alcohol consumption, lower life expectancy, much higher rates of imprisonment and of death by suicide. Around three-quarters of suicides registered in 2022 were males and it is surely no coincidence that London has the lowest suicide rate of any region while enjoying the highest education attainment rates. Meanwhile, the north-east has the highest suicide rate and among the lowest education outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Men are more likely to be obese and/or be diagnosed or die with cancer than women – obesity and cancer both being negatively correlated with education achievement.<sup>7</sup>

While 96% of the prison population is male, 57% of adult prisoners have literacy levels below those expected of an 11-year-old which, as well as being causally related to offending in the first place, also has a significant impact on rehabilitation and recidivism.<sup>8</sup>

Males dominate ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and autism diagnoses, dyslexia and stuttering. Colour blindness is almost exclusively male. One-quarter (24%) of parents think that boys in their child's school are made to feel ashamed of being male.<sup>9</sup> Is 'toxic masculinity' the cause or the effect of stigmatising boys and young men and failing to care about their education? We want girls to have role models to motivate them to achieve, yet we seem to be intensely relaxed about so many boys growing up with few male teachers, often in single-parent households (where the single parent is usually a mum not a dad) and in places where their doctor, the vet and the solicitor are also increasingly likely to be female. Is it any wonder they look to social media for their icons and heroes and are drawn too often to highly toxic versions of masculinity?

So, yes, it does matter. It matters because a significant minority of men and boys are unnecessarily underachieving in education as this report so graphically describes. They are going on to crowd our justice system and prisons, our hospitals, our negative narratives about masculinity and the continuing fight for gender equality in the workplace and in homes.

As well as societal damage, the UK suffers from low growth and productivity, and there are mounting calls on the public purse, notably for defence, health and of course education, yet the net loss to the Exchequer for under-educating our boys has never been calculated. The troubling data in this report should be a call to action for Government and policymakers who can surely no longer shy away from these uncomfortable facts.



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## Introduction

HEPI first addressed the problem of male educational underachievement in 2009 and 2010 and then revisited the issue in 2016.<sup>10</sup> We are doing so again now because, in the decade and a half since the first HEPI reports on the issue, the outlook for boys has got worse rather than better. Boys and young men fall far behind their female peers throughout the education system, from infant class to postgraduate study. Some gaps are still increasing, some have now stabilised and some adverse COVID-affected trends have improved somewhat in the past couple of years, but there is no evidence that we are making significant progress in reducing the disparities.

In one respect, however, there has been a clear positive change. When HEPI first tackled the issue back in 2009, and to a lesser extent when returning to the issue in 2016, the topic of boys' underperformance was seen as beyond the pale. In particular, some people protested that class should always trump sex when discussing the performance of individual learners.<sup>11</sup> But while girls from poorer backgrounds do much worse than those from better-off backgrounds, boys do even worse still. So any concerted and serious effort to equalise educational opportunities should pay at least some attention to the disparities in outcome between male and female learners, and this is now more widely recognised and accepted than in the past.

For example, a positive reception was given to the groundbreaking policy-focused book *Of Boys and Men: Why the modern male is struggling, why it matters, and what to do about it* (2022) by the British-born and US-based policy expert Richard Reeves, who focuses in particular on how boys' teenage brains typically develop later than those of girls. In 2023, the journalist Caitlin Moran, after writing various books about girls and women, had a best-selling book with *What About Men?* Also in 2023, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission said, 'Governments, education providers and relevant inspectorates should take, and report on, action to address the underperformance of boys relative to girls in primary and secondary education.'<sup>12</sup> In addition, there is a growing literature on how to teach boys effectively, such as *Boys Don't Try? Rethinking Masculinity in Schools* (2019) by Matt Pinkett and Mark Roberts, *Let's Hear It from the Boys: What boys really think about school and how to help them succeed* (2021) by Gary Wilson and *The Boy Question: How to Teach Boys to Succeed in School* (2022), which is also by Mark Roberts.



Elsewhere, HEPI has published extensively on the challenges faced by women in the education system. We have recently produced full-length reports on the gender pay gap in higher education, the disparity in grading at Oxbridge and the overall gender pay gap among graduates.<sup>13</sup> All three of these areas need a rebalancing in favour of women and should be tackled alongside any new activity for addressing the underachievement of young men. So it is worth stressing at the start that we do not believe that addressing the challenges faced by young men should come at the expense of addressing other educational problems or taking the focus away from challenges facing women.

It is possible to be concerned about multiple educational and societal challenges at the same time: indeed, this is essential if equal opportunities are to be meaningful. Those who want boys to do better do not want girls to do worse, and classrooms and lecture halls in which male students can more easily keep up with female students are likely to be better learning environments for all. Moreover, caring about the educational performance of young men need not divide the sexes: the mothers, grandmothers and female educators who help to raise young men – most teachers are women – often clearly recognise the scale of the challenge.

Yet people can still behave as if the subject of boys' underachievement is a little distasteful to consider in detail. When the issue has been raised in Parliament, for example, it has generally received recognition from Ministers only in the vaguest and most generalised ways and by lumping underperforming boys in with others rather than shining a dedicated light on the issue.

- When specifically asked about the issue of boys' performance in early 2024, the then Minister for Schools (Damian Hinds) said, 'Raising attainment for all pupils, no matter their gender or background is at the heart of this government's agenda and the government is committed to providing a world-class education system for all.'<sup>14</sup>
- After the new Government came to power in mid-2024, the official line remained the same, as shown by a parliamentary answer on 'white working-class boys attending university' from the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing (Janet Daby): 'This government will act to address the persistent gaps for different groups and break down the

barriers to opportunity. Opportunity should be available to all but too many people across our country do not get the chance to succeed.<sup>15</sup> Boys and men did not merit a mention.

When he was the Minister for Universities and Science in the mid-2010s, Jo Johnson did speak about the small number of white working-class boys in higher education, including putting an expectation on the Office for Fair Access to focus on the issue: 'Barely 10% of white British boys from the most disadvantaged backgrounds go to university, making them 5 times less likely to study at this level than the most advantaged white boys.'<sup>16</sup> But the focus was short-lived and no Westminster Government, whether Coalition, Conservative or Labour, has ever launched a dedicated strategy to address the long-standing, clear and large educational shortfall of boys. Just as there had never been a dedicated health strategy for women until as recently as 2022, there has never been a dedicated official education strategy for men.

The devolved administrations and arms-length regulators, such as Ofsted and the Office for Students, have also not given much of a focus to male underachievement. It is true that, back in 2016, the Scottish Funding Council won considerable plaudits for setting targets to reduce the gender gap in undergraduate participation to no more than five percentage points by 2030 and to ensure no higher education institution had an imbalance of 75% or more of one gender. But Scotland has gone backwards on gender disparities in higher education since then, and the answers we have received from the many people whom we have asked about the issue suggest the goal seems to have been largely ignored in recent years.<sup>17</sup>

If the current Labour Government at Westminster is serious about addressing the remaining barriers to accessing higher education and to improving social mobility, as it has repeatedly stated, then a dedicated focus on male educational underachievement could reap huge dividends.<sup>18</sup> Exactly what that might look like is up for debate but the following pages consider the arguments for having a Minister for Men to oversee a new strategy, for training more men to be classroom teachers and for expanding those grassroots initiatives that can be proven to make a material and cost-effective difference.

The overarching goals of this paper are modest: to draw attention back to the problem of educational disparities between men and women and to

stimulate conversations and a greater focus on the challenges. We hope it will be of particular interest to those working in and supporting educational settings, such as teachers and higher education staff, governors of institutions and policymakers of all persuasions as well as other interested parties, such as parents, careers advisers and the media. Anyone who wishes to go further and to consider additional policy interventions is urged to consult HEPI's past papers on the topic, which remain available on the HEPI website, as well as more recent work by other organisations, including the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Men and Boys and their 2023 *Closing the Gender Attainment Gap* report.<sup>19</sup>

If male underachievement is not tackled, it seems certain that we will store up further societal problems for the future – including, arguably, the risk of under-educated men veering towards the political extremes. If, in contrast, the problems are gripped, then there are likely to be beneficial outcomes for social justice, young men's satisfaction with their own lives and national economic growth, with no obvious downsides.

Notably, the UK is not alone in having a big gap between the educational achievement of men and women. According to a 2023 report from the OECD, the proportion of women aged 25 to 65 in developed countries with tertiary education overtook the proportion of men around the turn of the millennium and is now streets ahead:

*Since 2000, access to tertiary education has been growing for both men and women, but particularly for women. In recent decades, the share of women with tertiary education has risen consistently, reversing the historical gender gap in favour of men. While the percentage of men with a tertiary degree increased by 13 percentage points (from 22% to 35%) between 2000 to 2020, the percentage of women with a tertiary degree increased by an additional 7 percentage points [to 42%] in the same period.<sup>20</sup>*

By 2022, women made up significantly more than half (56%) of first-time tertiary entrants across the OECD as a whole and women were in a majority of entrants in every OECD member country.<sup>21</sup>

The global nature of the challenges underscores the extent of the problem but also provides an opportunity for countries to work together or to learn from one another on how best to deliver more equal opportunities.

# 1. Disparities between men and women in higher education

## *How we got here*

Back at the 1999 Labour Party Conference, Tony Blair famously adopted a target of 50% participation in higher education for young people in **England**.<sup>22</sup> Figures for 1999/00 suggest that, when he made this pledge, 37% of males and 41% of women would reach higher education before the age of 30. So there was a 4 percentage-point gap between the sexes.

By 2017/18, the year when the overarching 50% pledge was first thought to have been surpassed, the numbers had risen to 44% for young men and 57% for young women, a gap of 13 percentage points.<sup>23</sup>

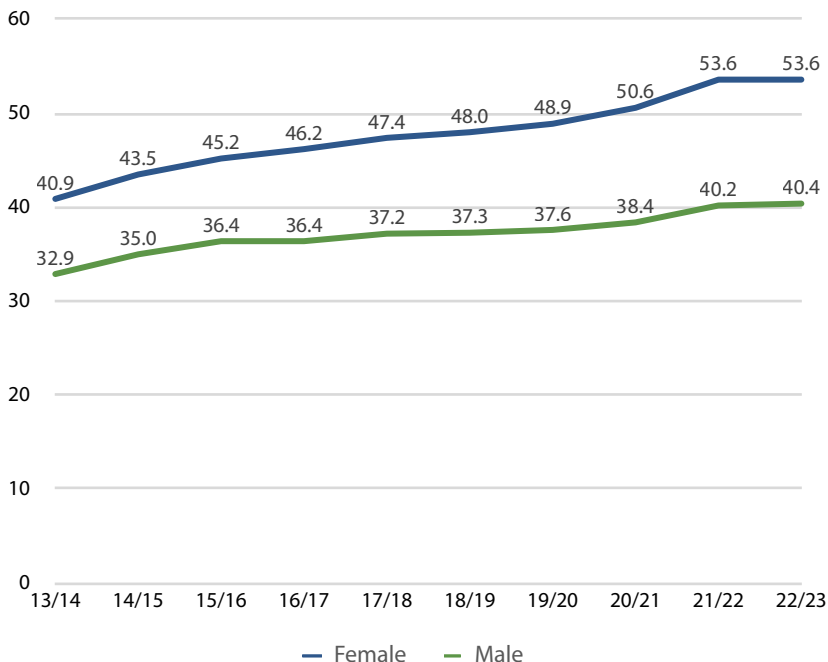
Although there have been changes to the way such data are published, the latest broadly comparable data release, published in the late February 2025, which focuses particularly on reaching higher education by the age of 25, shows a widening of the gap between higher education participation by young men and young women. This is due not only to another increase in the female participation rate but also a drop in the male participation rate: 'This is the first recorded year-on-year decrease for either males or females since the 2001/02 cohort [where the data series begins].'<sup>24</sup>

So it is women who ensured New Labour's 50% target was hit. Yet the many opponents of the target, who want to see fewer people access higher education, as well as those calling for the reimposition of student number caps never seem to recognise that such changes would likely hit women harder than men.

The chart below shows the scale of the gap between men and women over the last decade for state-educated pupils in England who enter higher education by the age of 19.

The story elsewhere is similar. For example, in **Scotland**. The Scottish Funding Council committed in 2016 to reducing the gender gap in undergraduate study from 15.4 percentage points to no more than 5 percentage points by 2030, with an interim target of 13.6 percentage points for 2019/20. Yet the gap in university enrolments by men and women from Scotland widened after these targets were set.

Proportion of men and women in England who entered higher education by age 19, per cent



Source: Department for Education, *Academic year 2022/23: Widening participation in higher education*, October 2024 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

In 2021, the Scottish Government noted higher education enrolments among young women from Scotland 'are higher than male enrolments – 58.4% compared to 41.5% in 2019/20. This gap has widened from 14.1 pp [percentage points] in 2014/15 to 16.9 pp in 2019/20'.<sup>25</sup>

By 2021/22, the gap between male and female Scottish-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants had grown to 20.5 percentage points (though this was actually slightly lower than during the two preceding COVID-affected years).<sup>26</sup>

This yawning gap tends to be overlooked in discussions about access to higher education. For example, when giving evidence to the Education, Children and Young People Committee of the Scottish Parliament in

February 2025, Professor John McKendrick, Commissioner for Fair Access, said:

*you've got other parts of the UK that welcome and look with a little bit of jealousy if you like to the strategy that we have in Scotland to pursue this. The commitment to fair access is stronger here in Scotland than [it] is in other parts of the UK. ... I certainly think we've a stronger commitment to fair access here than we have elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>*

Whether or not this is true when it comes to the other personal characteristics of young people in Scotland, when applied to the educational achievement gaps between young men and young women, such bold statements appear naïve or worse.

### *The current picture*

**Across the whole UK**, there are around 750,000 school leavers each year and, according to data from UCAS, 36.4% of 18-year-olds immediately enter higher education.<sup>28</sup> However, this average masks a 10.9 percentage point gap between men (30.4%) and women (41.3%) – that is 35,000 more women than men and means women leaving school and college are over one-third as likely as their male peers to secure a place in higher education.<sup>29</sup>

Looking at the more comprehensive and arguably more useful measure of UCAS applicants aged 19 and under (rather than just those aged 18), in 2024/25 there were around 44,000 fewer UK-domiciled men than women who accepted a place at a UK higher education institution.

However, because there are more men than women born each year (at a ratio of around 105:100), if young women and young men were to go to higher education in the same proportions, then there would actually be somewhat more male students.

As a result, the gap between what currently happens and full equity stands at around 55,000 missing men each year. In other words, there have been half a million 'missing men' over the past decade as a whole.

Higher education acceptances, UK-domiciled

Year	19 and under			All ages		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
<b>2015/16</b>	146,385	182,145	35,760	201,960	261,755	59,795
<b>2016/17</b>	147,925	184,695	36,770	201,730	263,750	62,020
<b>2017/18</b>	147,050	184,265	37,215	199,345	263,600	64,255
<b>2018/19</b>	142,975	181,535	38,560	196,105	263,180	67,075
<b>2019/20</b>	142,790	182,790	40,000	196,900	267,435	70,535
<b>2020/21</b>	147,650	191,650	44,000	203,405	281,995	78,590
<b>2021/22</b>	153,540	198,685	45,145	206,645	285,360	78,715
<b>2022/23</b>	154,745	199,500	44,755	209,250	280,110	70,860
<b>2023/24</b>	152,775	196,390	43,615	208,690	274,200	65,510
<b>2024/25</b>	153,365	197,030	43,665	210,500	275,565	65,065
<b>TOTAL</b>	1,489,200	1,898,685	409,485	2,034,530	2,716,950	682,420

Source: UCAS, *Undergraduate End of Cycle Data Resources 2024*, 12 December 2024 <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2024>. This table takes no account of the fact that there are more men than women born each year, so equal access would mean more male than female students.

Men do not catch up later by enrolling in disproportionately higher numbers as mature students either: most mature students, like most younger students, are women. As a result, the latest annual gap for all ages, rather than just younger cohorts, amounts to 65,000 (275,565 women and 210,500 men). The numerical gap between male and female accepted applicants over the past decade as a whole totals an astonishing 682,420. Again, as there are around 5% more men born each year, if the same proportion of men and women had gone to higher education in this period, then between three-quarters of a million and one million more men would have accessed the benefits of higher education in the past decade alone.

A preliminary analysis of an initial range of submitted 2025/26 Access and Participation Plans for English higher education institutions in the Office for Students' Approved (fee cap) category, kindly conducted for HEPI by the Office for Students, shows some higher education providers have set overall targets that reference 'male students'. Among this group of 30

providers, 26 focused broadly on male students while four targeted ‘white male economically disadvantaged students’.

However, this means the majority of universities still do not formally recognise men as a disadvantaged group with respect to university entry. This limits specific action from taking place – such as targeted promotion of higher education to boys and their parents within schools and communities. A more formal approach could also help to address the big gender gap in access to the higher tariff (more selective) universities, which is another challenge that is clear in the annual UCAS dataset.

Gender gaps are not only present among higher education students of all ages but also in richer and poorer socio-economic groups and across all four parts of the UK. The entry rate gap for 18-year-olds, as recorded by UCAS, is actually bigger in Northern Ireland (at 15.7 percentage points) and Wales (12.8 percentage points), where less than one-quarter of 18-year old men make it to higher education, than in either Scotland (11.6 percentage points) or England (10.6 percentage points).<sup>30</sup> The gender gaps in entry to higher education, as well as in retention and completion rates and in the awarding of First Class degrees, reflect the reality that young men now fall behind young women at every major educational staging post from early years to doctorates.<sup>31</sup>

*18-year-old acceptances by domicile, per cent*

	<b>England</b>	<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Wales</b>
<b>Men</b>	31.4%	29.8%	24.2%	23.4%
<b>Women</b>	42.0%	45.5%	35.8%	36.2%
<b>Percentage Point Gap</b>	10.6%	15.7%	11.6%	12.8%

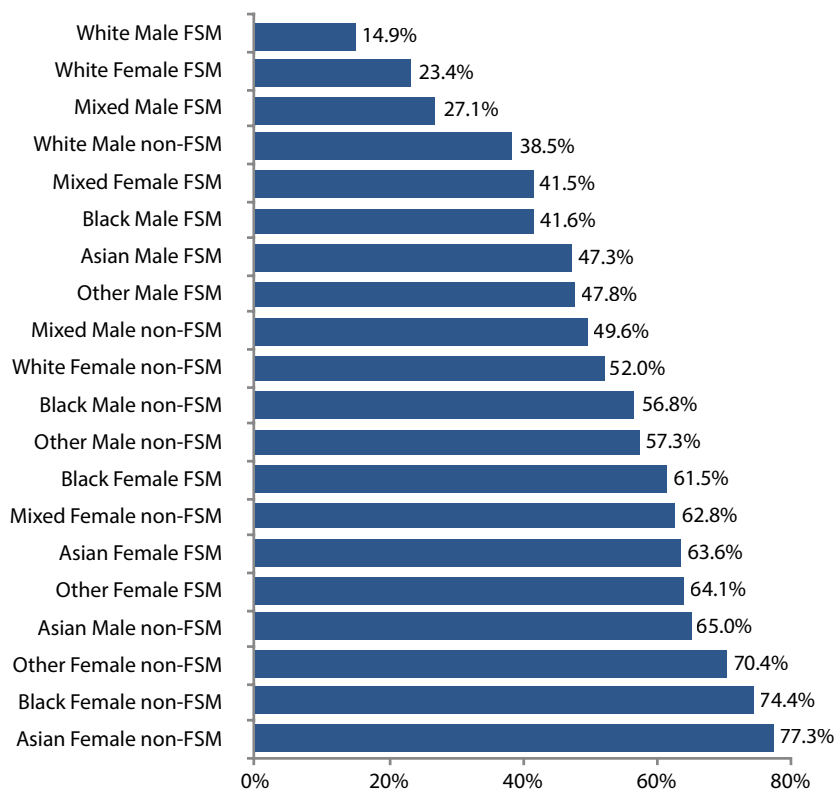
Source: UCAS, *Undergraduate End of Cycle Data Resources 2024*, 12 December 2024 <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2024>. See endnote 28 on Scotland.

While poorer male students are less likely to attend higher education than their female counterparts, there is considerable disparity by ethnic background. The barriers against enrolling in higher education are particularly high among white working-class boys. By age 19, the progression rate for White students who have been entitled to Free School Meals (FSM) in England is 14.9%, which is three times lower than for Asian



FSM males (47.3%). An Asian FSM female is over four times (63.6%) more likely to progress to higher education than a White FSM male.<sup>32</sup> As Mary Curnock Cook said in a speech to the British Psychological Society's Male Psychology Section in late 2023, 'If you are black you are more likely to be poor; but if you are white and poor, you are most likely to be disadvantaged in education.'<sup>33</sup>

*Progression to higher education, England domiciles, by age 19, FSM eligibility, gender and ethnic group, 2022/23*



Source: Department for Education, *Academic year 2022/23: Widening Participation in Higher Education*, November 2024 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2022-23>

Young men and young women who do make it to higher education veer disproportionately towards certain academic disciplines. For example, UCAS data show over six times as many women as men study Education / Teaching and Veterinary Science and over four times as many take Psychology and Subjects allied to Medicine.<sup>34</sup> In Nursing alone, women outnumber men by around 9:1.<sup>35</sup> Over three times as many women as men opt for Languages and more than twice as many take Law and Agriculture / Land, while men are significantly more likely than women to opt for Engineering and Technology, Computing and Mathematics. Richard Reeves has argued that – just as women have successfully been encouraged to enter some scientific roles (as confirmed by a recent HEPI Paper by Peter Mandler) – we should actively engage men in entering Health, Education, Administrative and Literacy (HEAL) occupations.<sup>36</sup>

As a result of differential entry and completion rates, in 2022/23 the number of UK-domiciled women studying at a UK university who received a first degree was 213,000, which is 50% higher than the number of men (144,000).<sup>37</sup> Part of the reason this disparity does not receive the attention it might is that, according to the King’s College Policy Institute, 88% of the public do not know that fewer men than women go to university while 77% believe the numbers are the same.<sup>38</sup>

While this paper generally focuses on the school and undergraduate phases of education, it is also notable that the disparity between men and women go on becoming bigger as the level of education rises. So there is a particularly stark disparity among postgraduates. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggest 59% of all UK-domiciled students are female and 41% are male, but just 36% of UK-domiciled postgraduates are male while nearly two-thirds (64%) are female.

*Students at higher education institutions, UK domiciles, 2022/23*

	<b>Undergraduate</b>	<b>Postgraduate</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Total female</b>	1,010,240	269,730	1,279,970
<b>Total male</b>	729,615	152,610	882,225
<b>Total (including unknown sex)</b>	<b>1,749,015</b>	<b>426,515</b>	<b>2,175,530</b>

Source: HESA, *Student numbers and characteristics 2022/23*, August 2024 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/08-08-2024/sb269-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers>

## Other factors

The gap between men and women undertaking traditional routes of higher education does not arise because men dominate other education and training opportunities. For example, in 2022/23 in England, just under 60,000 men aged over 19 completed an apprenticeship compared with around 68,000 women (although, at degree level, the numbers of male and female apprentices are almost identical).<sup>39</sup>

Boys are expelled from schools at a much higher rate than girls, there are far more young men than young women in custody and three times as many teenage boys take their own lives.<sup>40</sup> Although it is not explored further here, boys are also more likely to be assessed as having Special Educational Needs.

*Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), October to December 2024*

<b>Age 16 to 24</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
<b>Economically inactive</b>	289,000 (7.7%)	286,000 (7.9%)
<b>Economically active (unemployed)</b>	251,000 (6.7%)	144,000 (4.0%)
<b>Total</b>	540,000 (14.4%)	429,000 (11.9%)

Source: Office for National Statistics, *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)*, February 2025 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/file?uri=/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortraining-neettable1/current/notineducationemploymentortrainingod24.xlsx>

So perhaps it should – sadly – come as little surprise that the disparity in outcomes is clear in the data on young people who are not in education, employment or training, the so-called ‘NEETs’: in late 2024, 251,000 men aged 16 to 24 and 144,000 women were unemployed, while a further 289,000 men and 286,000 women were economically inactive but not officially unemployed, meaning there were 111,000 more ‘economically inactive’ young men than young women.

## 2. Disparities before higher education

Gender disparities in higher education reflect what happens beforehand. The gender attainment gap starts very early. In 2016, a report called *The Lost Boys* by Save the Children looking at early years education noted: '80,000 boys had fallen behind by the age of five [in 2015]; and boys in England are nearly twice as likely as girls to fall behind in early language and communication.'<sup>41</sup>

The latest Early Years Foundation Stage data for England show three-quarters of girls (75.0%) but only 60.2% of boys have 'a good level of development'. This 14.3 percentage-point gap is more than double the 6.2 percentage-point gap between the children who have English as a first language (69.7%) and those who do not (63.5%) and it is only slightly smaller than the gap between autumn-born (75.6%) and summer-born children (60.0%), which stands at 15.6 percentage points. Moreover, these two other gaps have been falling year-on-year whereas the gap between very young girls and very young boys has been rising.<sup>42</sup>

By age 11, 64% of girls in England meet the expected standard in reading, writing and Mathematics compared to 57% of boys. The biggest attainment gap between boys and girls at this stage is in writing, which stands at 13 percentage points. On average, boys (slightly) outperform girls in Mathematics, which is a trend seen throughout the education system, though it is not considered in more detail here.

*Student results, Key Stage 2 SATS, England, 2024, per cent*

	Boys	Girls
<b>Mathematics</b>	74	73
<b>Reading</b>	71	78
<b>Writing</b>	65	78
<b>Combined (reading, writing and maths)</b>	57	64
<b>Grammar, punctuation and spelling</b>	69	76
<b>Science</b>	79	84

Source: Department for Education, *Academic year 2023/24 – Key stage 2 attainment*, September 2024 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment>

A comparable gap is evident in English secondary school results, whether looking at GCSEs, Attainment 8 scores (which show a pupil's average grades across eight subjects) or the English Baccalaureate (which is a school performance measure).

*Student results, Key Stage 4, England, 2023/24*

	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
<b>Pupils with grades 5+ in English and Maths GCSEs</b>	43.6%	48.3%
<b>Average Attainment 8 score of all pupils</b>	43.7	48.2
<b>Average EBacc score per pupil</b>	3.90	4.26

Source: Department for Education, *Academic year 2023/24: Key stage 4 performance*, February 2025 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance>

Progress 8 scores, which track how much a student progresses from the end of their primary education to their GCSEs, are 0.09 for girls and -0.15 for boys. This means girls progress more than average when compared to similar pupils in their prior attainment group but boys perform worse than expected by the end of Key Stage 4.<sup>43</sup>

The gender attainment gap is also clear at A-Level.<sup>44</sup> In England, fewer 18-year-old men take A-Levels than 18-year-old women and a smaller proportion of the male entrants achieve grades C or above. A similar pattern exists in the other three UK nations.

Although a slightly higher proportion of A-Levels taken by men achieve the very highest grade (A\*), the higher entry rate among women means there are still more A\*s awarded to women than there are to men: in 2024, men secured just over 33,000 A\* grades but women secured 37,000.

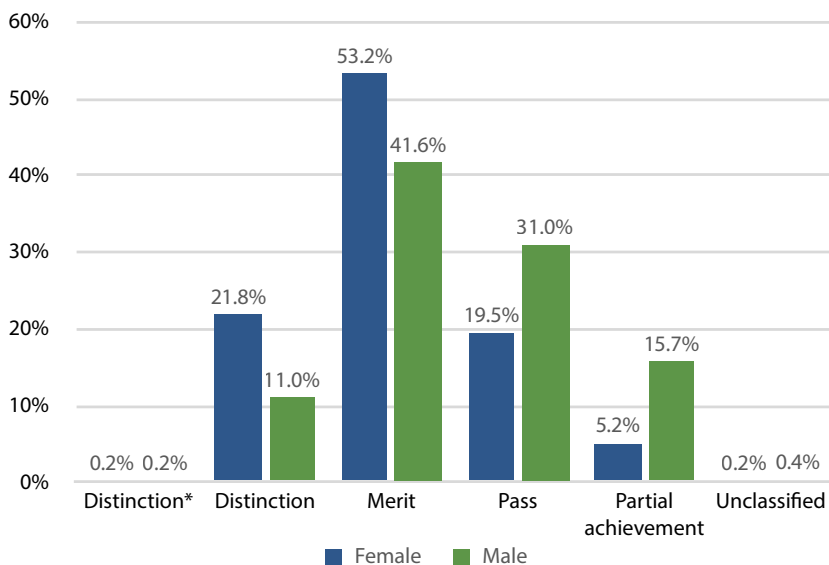
*A-Level outcomes, England, 2024, 18-year-olds, per cent*

	<b>A-Level entries</b>	<b>A*</b>	<b>A*-A</b>	<b>C and above</b>
<b>Men</b>	348,425	9.5	27.6	74.4
<b>Women</b>	406,345	9.1	28.1	78.9

Source: Ofqual, *A-Level outcomes in England, 2024* <https://analytics.ofqual.gov.uk/apps/Alevel/Outcomes/>

T-Levels are two-year vocational courses available in England that are designed to be equivalent to three A-levels. They were introduced in September 2020, at the first qualifications awarded in August 2022. Although T-Levels have yet to take off in a big way and although more males than females take them (with a ratio of 55:45), as with A-Levels women do better than men: 94.7% of female T-Level entrants achieved a pass or higher in 2024, compared with 83.9% of male T-Level entrants.<sup>45</sup> Women were also twice as likely to secure a Distinction. Indeed, although there were fewer female T-Level candidates, more women than men received a Distinction.

Students, provisional T-Level results, sex, 2024, per cent



Source: Department for Education, *Academic year 2023/24: Provisional T Level results, August 2024* <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/provisional-t-level-results#dataBlock-4d5e23f7-ae53-4dc6-b7e2-1b29a743b4c9-tables>

Although there have always been considerable differences in the education systems of England and Scotland, when it comes to performance according to the sex of pupils, the picture is similar on both sides of the border. For example, while the number of National 5 (GCSE-level) entries from boys and girls is very similar (with 49.8% of entries by boys and 50.2% by girls),

there is a clear disparity in favour of girls at Highers (45.9% versus 54.1%) and Advanced Highers (45.1% and 54.9%), both of which prepare pupils for higher level study. Female pupils are also more likely to secure the toughest grades – for example, 78.1% of Advanced Higher entries from women score A to C, against 71.8% of entries from male pupils.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, in Wales young women take more A-Levels than men (56.5%:43.5%) and, among those who take them, women are more likely to achieve higher grades.<sup>47</sup>

The picture is comparable in Northern Ireland too: '74.1% of female pupils in Year 14 achieved 3 or more A-levels at grades A\*-C (including equivalents) compared with 68.0% of male pupils in 2023/24.'<sup>48</sup>

It seems the devolution of education policy makes little difference to the relative performance of male students, though smart policymaking could potentially make it easier to test alternative approaches and provide opportunities for different areas to learn from practice elsewhere.

### **3. Why have boys and young men fallen so far behind?**

If people were certain of the reasons for the differences in outcomes between boys and girls, then closing the gap would be mainly a matter of identifying the right remedies and putting them in place accordingly. However, in the past there has not been sufficient focus, research or debate on the issue to come to definitive answers. That is why Richard Reeves has summarised the academic work on disparities in college completion rates by gender in the US, as 'We don't know.'

Nonetheless, some useful initiatives have revealed higher obstacles to learning and achievement among young men relative to young women, including lower educational aspirations, a shortage of role models of the same sex and bias among teachers.

#### *Barriers*

Research among young white British males from five disadvantaged areas in the north-west of England by Neil Raven identifies motivational barriers against more participation in higher education, including:

- the direct costs of being a student;
- the opportunity costs from not being able to enter full-time work;
- the lack of a guarantee on successful job outcomes;
- a concern that higher education would feel like an extension of school;
- fears about the workload; and
- worries about not 'fitting in'.<sup>49</sup>

The All-Party Parliamentary Group's 2023 report was partly based on interviews with a wide range of educationalists. Alongside a general warning not to assume that boys are immune from certain challenges (such as online bullying), a number of additional reasons for boys' relative underperformance were outlined, including:

- schools having lower expectations of boys;
- teachers not sufficiently explaining where learning leads in terms of outcomes;



- sensitivity to being seen as either an academic failure or as ‘too academic’;
- cultural expectations from communities and peer groups, including other boys;
- failure to access support services – including a fear of being seen as weak;
- insufficient parental support and involvement;
- lack of individual support for literacy and oracy; and
- a shortage of study skills, with girls sometimes being considered as better at consistent learning.<sup>50</sup>

In the UK, there are approximately 1.5 million male dependent children in single-parent households headed by the mother, with no father or step-father present.<sup>51</sup> Lads Need Dads surveyed 1,250 teachers in Essex on whether the absence of a positive male role model at home matters and they found 68% of primary school teachers and 78% of secondary school teachers believe it affects boys’ academic achievements.<sup>52</sup>

Research published in 2023 by the University of Leeds found children do better at primary school if their fathers regularly spend time with them on interactive engagement activities like reading, playing, telling stories, drawing and singing.<sup>53</sup>

### *Teachers*

Just one-quarter (24%) of the teaching workforce are male, with around one-quarter of a million more female teachers (390,000) than male teachers (125,000).<sup>54</sup> At nursery and primary level, only one-in-seven teachers are male, although this rises somewhat to 35% at secondary level. According to the Education Policy Institute, 30% of primary schools have no male teachers at all.<sup>55</sup> It is disputed whether or not having more male teachers would make much difference to boys’ achievement across the board but it is thought to make a particular difference in some disciplines (such as English).<sup>56</sup> Many people believe the presence of more male teachers normalises learning as a suitable activity for men and may especially help children with no positive male role models at home.

In 2004, Professor Debra Myhill suggested cultural and gender bias created a perception of ‘troublesome boys and compliant girls’:

*Not only do teachers see boy underachievers as being different from girl underachievers, but much of what they describe as typical boy behaviour has also become the epitome of underachieving behaviour.<sup>57</sup>*

A decade later, the OECD found ‘teachers generally award girls higher marks than boys’ and recommended that teachers should be trained ‘to be aware of their own gender biases.’<sup>58</sup>

The COVID pandemic provided further evidence for this. During the shift to teacher assessments (in 2020 and 2021) and then back to examinations (from 2022), the gap between young men and women increased and then fell – although this could reflect factors other than teacher bias, such as young men struggling more with the disruption to schooling.

Research highlighted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Issues Affecting Men and Boys looked specifically at 18-year-old men and women achieving A to A\* grades in their A-Levels in England. This is a useful point to look at as there was little gender disparity in these top grades in the 2019 results – in fact, men were very slightly ahead of women. As can be seen, a gap in favour of women emerged in 2020 to 2022 and then fell back again from 2022. In 2023 and 2024, there was less than one percentage point difference once more, as before COVID, but this time the gap slightly favoured women.

*A\* and A awards at A-Level at age 18, England, per cent*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Gap</b>
<b>2019</b>	25.6	25.4	+0.2
<b>2020</b>	36.4	39.7	-3.3
<b>2021</b>	41.6	46.4	-4.8
<b>2022</b>	35.0	37.3	-2.3
<b>2023</b>	26.5	27.0	-0.5
<b>2024</b>	27.6	28.1	-0.5

Source: Ofqual, *A-Level outcomes in England*

Teachers themselves tend to believe the teacher workforce should be more evenly balanced in terms of men and women: research produced in 2023 by Nick Fletcher, who was then a Member of Parliament, suggested 81% of current and former teachers think more male teachers are needed.<sup>59</sup> The same research showed the blockages against this happening include the terms and conditions for teachers, a fear of false allegations and a lack of career progression.

### *Teenagers*

It is commonly recognised today that, while the actual overall differences between men and women can sometimes be exaggerated, the important changes that happen within the brain during the teenage years do happen later in boys than in girls on average. While this biological fact, which comes from a fast-moving area of modern research, is not yet generally recognised in terms of hard policies, Richard Reeves argues it should prompt a major change. He argues boys should start formal education a year later than girls, meaning boys would spend longer in early years settings:

*Many of the differences between boys and girls in today's classrooms are because the girls are just much 'older,' developmentally speaking. We can send boys to the same schools as girls, just a year later.<sup>60</sup>*

Children in England, Wales and Scotland currently start school at age five, which is above the European average of six and far behind those countries that wait until the age of seven. In England, education or training is compulsory until the age of 18, meaning 13 years of compulsory education, which is above the European norm of 10 or 11 years.<sup>61</sup>

There are other ways in which the relative immaturity of young men can be recognised in terms of educational provision too. For example, if young men and young women emerge from school and college with different average outcomes, extra education can be offered afterwards. Foundation years, for example, can help people who have not met regular entry requirements to prepare for higher education and just over one-half of foundation year students are male. The previous HEPI report on the underachievement of young men recommended expanding this route, but the impending cut in the fee cap for many foundation year courses may reduce the number of places.<sup>62</sup> Outreach programmes from charities and universities, which

promote the benefits of higher education, can be effective too, but – currently – young men tend to be severely under-represented on them: only 32% of people on Sutton Trust outreach programmes are male.<sup>63</sup>

### *Foundation years*

Although six-in-10 undergraduates are female, a (very slightly) higher proportion of all foundation year students are male (51:49). This is in stark contrast to the comparable college-based access courses, which the 2019 Augar report preferred, for they have a ratio of 3:1 in favour of women.

The previous Conservative Government promised to reduce the fee cap that can be charged for many foundation year courses, 'to make them more accessible and more affordable for those who need a second chance.'<sup>64</sup> However, there are well-founded fears that a lower fee cap will affect the supply of foundation year places, making them less accessible.<sup>65</sup> Despite this, the lower foundation year fee cap has been confirmed by the Labour Government and will take effect from 2025/26.

Because foundation years – unlike the mainstream entry route to higher education – are balanced in terms of the sex of the beneficiaries, the official *Equality Analysis* argues the changes will have no detrimental impact: 'As the proportion of males and females studying classroom-based foundation year subjects is similar, a fee limit change to these classroom-based subjects will not disproportionately impact students based on sex.'<sup>66</sup>

Yet if a significant proportion of foundation year courses succumb to the financial and political barriers being put in their way, then undergraduate provision will surely become even less balanced in terms of the sex of students.

## 4. What can be done?

### *Schools and grassroots initiatives*

While the response to the sort of data presented in this paper has typically been muted, a small number of important initiatives aimed at boosting boys' educational achievements have sprung up in recent years. These suggest the most impactful change could be to develop a 'boy positive' learning environment, learning from those schools where a dedicated focus on reducing gender disparities has proved successful. The educationalist Mark Roberts believes it is important to tap into boys' motivation and masculinity in an intrinsic sense (mastery) and an extrinsic one (utility).<sup>67</sup>

Academics at Ulster University led by Dr Susan Morgan have developed a Taking Boys Seriously framework, which is based on helping working-class boys in Northern Ireland. It has 10 core principles:

- i. recognise the primacy of relationship;
- ii. demonstrate dignity and respect;
- iii. utilise a 'strengths-based approach' to learning (rather than only addressing weaknesses);
- iv. challenge and affirm masculine identities;
- v. promote positive mental health;
- vi. identify blocks to boys learning;
- vii. connect boys learning to context;
- viii. engage meaningfully with boys;
- ix. enable creative learning environments; and
- x. value the voice of boys.<sup>68</sup>

These principles form the foundation of a grassroots network created by Dr Alex Blower at the Arts University Bournemouth called Boys' Impact focused in particular on gaps in GCSE outcomes for male pupils entitled to Free School Meals and 'to undertake strategic activity in research, pedagogy, policy and practice to support the outcomes of young men in

their local educational, social, and geographic contexts.<sup>69</sup> A regional hub system has been created with educationalists from different areas coming together to promote improvements in boys' education and to champion the Taking Boys Seriously framework. Other grassroots initiatives include Lads Need Dads, which runs a range of programmes such as a reading mentoring scheme, and the Fatherhood Institute's FRED (Fathers Reading Every Day) campaign.

Such programmes should be robustly evaluated and then expanded, including with seed-corn funding, if it can be shown that they make a significant and cost-effective difference in outcomes.<sup>70</sup> It is worth noting that some specific changes aimed at a boy-positive environment could be cheap and straightforward to deliver – such as marking International Men's Day. According to polling conducted for Civitas, 40% of sixth formers say International Women's Day is marked at their school but only 13% say the same about International Men's Day. In addition, 41% said they had been taught young men are a problem for society, which need not cost anything to stop.<sup>71</sup>

### *Parliamentarians and regulators*

But change must not be left solely to hard-pressed teachers and under-resourced civic groups. It needs to be encouraged by regulators and pushed by policymakers too. In particular, gender disparities, including gender disparities in the educational workforce, should have had a bigger focus in Ofsted inspections and in higher education institutions' Access and Participation Plans, which are overseen by the Office for Students. Local authorities may have diminished responsibility for schooling, but they could still play a role in leadership and oversight, as could the larger Multi-Academy Trusts. After all, the Public Sector Equality Duty, which compels authorities to have regard to equality considerations in the exercise of their functions, applies to both schools and higher education institutions.

Immediately prior to the 2024 General Election, the Education Select Committee began an investigation into *Boys' attainment and engagement in education*. They had received a small number of written submissions before Parliament was dissolved for the Election, including one from Mary Curnock Cook, a HEPI Trustee and former Chief Executive of UCAS, which noted: 'There are vanishingly few people researching what works for boys

in education and there continues to be a policy vacuum on the subject.<sup>72</sup> As a result, leadership from parliamentarians could be especially important and we would like to see the members of the current Education Select Committee follow up on the cancelled initiative of their predecessors.

The Education, Children and Young People Committee in the Scottish Parliament is currently undertaking an inquiry into progress on 'Widening access to higher education' which specifically refers to 'deprivation' and 'disabled students, students from minority ethnic backgrounds and students with care experience'.<sup>73</sup> There is no reference to gender but, at the time of writing, it is not too late to incorporate this personal characteristic too alongside the others.

The role of parliamentary committees is to hold those in power to account and we need a better understanding of why Scotland's 2016 *Gender Action Plan* has made so little difference when it comes to closing higher education participation gaps. One likely explanation is that the funding of undergraduate education for Scottish-domiciled students, which is expensive to the public purse but still produces large losses for institutions, currently makes it difficult to increase the number of Scottish students by recruiting more men.

### *Ministers*

As well as grassroots and teacher-led initiatives, oversight from school and higher education regulators and investigations by parliamentarians, we need a lead from those in power. For example, Ministers could:

- learn from the successful (but far from complete) push to get more women into scientific areas to get more men on to pathways leading to professions that currently employ few men – the Men and Boys Coalition have suggested a 'This Boy Can' approach to getting boys into teaching, care roles and nursing which is worth exploring further as a low-cost and speedy intervention;
- supplement the Terms of Reference of England's Curriculum and Assessment Review to ensure it considers the current gender attainment gap and then test its recommendations for fairness between the sexes;<sup>74</sup>
- expect a more dedicated focus on gender disparities, including male educational underachievement, from arms-length institutions that

report to policymakers, such as the Social Mobility Commission and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, as well as from the Children's Commissioner – and in Scotland by the Commissioner for Fair Access;

- encourage, and where necessary fund, research from institutions such as the Education Endowment Fund and the National Foundation for Educational Research on under-researched areas affecting boys' education, such as the impact of male teachers and differential treatment of boys and girls by teachers;
- take action in specific areas where existing rules disproportionately affect men's access to education – for instance, given that 96% of prisoners are men, the current rule restricting prisoners' access to undergraduate student finance to those within six years of their release date mainly affects men.<sup>75</sup>

However, while each of these changes would make an important difference, they would likely benefit from being part of a wider and coherent strategy focused on improving male educational achievement, with specific Minister(s) having clear responsibility for its delivery.

### *A Minister for Men?*

There have been calls for at least 20 years for there to be a new post of Minister for Men.<sup>76</sup> Before leaving Parliament at the 2024 election, Nick Fletcher MP wrote for the *Daily Telegraph*:

*We need a Minister for Men.*

*They would provide a laser-like focus on these issues across government. He or even she, it does not matter to me, would hold government ministers to account and act as a focal point for policy change. They would also help to change the political conversation that seems to imply that only women have problems and only men are problems.*

One journalist has opposed this idea on the grounds that the postholder could end up as 'one of the busiest people in government, but they would hold a cross-departmental brief with no actual power to affect change whatsoever.'<sup>77</sup>



Currently, there is a Cabinet-level Minister for Women and Equalities who has 'strategic oversight of the government's equality policy, for women, ethnicity, disability and LGBT+' as well as a deputy Minister of State for Women and Equalities in the House of Lords.<sup>78</sup>

The most senior current postholder is the Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson MP, and the deputy is the Minister for Skills, the Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern. Given the relative educational underachievement of boys and men and Bridget Phillipson's recent letter imploring higher education leaders to make more progress on widening higher education admissions, alternatives to having a new Cabinet-level Minister for Men would be to appoint a cross-cutting junior Minister for Men and Boys or a named minister within the Department for Education specifically tasked with addressing the relative educational underachievement of male pupils and students.

## Conclusion

While the problem of male underperformance has been written about by HEPI and others before, there has been little action or much concern until recently. It has sometimes felt like, even when the problem of male underperformance has been understood, it has been seen as an immutable fact of modern life or one that is too hard to tackle, needing significant financial resources, a shift in aspiration levels and a change in culture.

The lack of urgency may stem in part from the unavoidable fact that, historically, the roles were reversed, with more male than female students (until the 1990s) or a general sense that women face so many remaining barriers of their own, especially in the labour market, that male underachievement may simply balance these other factors out. Yet it is difficult to accept the silence would be the same if the genders were reversed or if the focus were on a characteristic other than gender.

So we have reserved the final word for the experienced teacher Gary Wilson and his helpful and optimistic book *Let's Hear it from the Boys*:

*the bottom line is we love teaching boys – we certainly wouldn't want to do them any harm. We love to see how enthusiastic they get when we grab them with something that interests them. We love the fact they love taking risks. We love the fact that they can be a little bit more challenging sometimes, as that can make it more rewarding. We love their openness, their honesty. We love their sense of fun, their sense of humour, the fun we can have. And perhaps above all, we love the fact that every day's a new day for them. But isn't it a shame it's not always the same the other way round?*<sup>79</sup>

## Afterword

**Dr Susan Morgan, Taking Boys Seriously Principal Investigator, and  
Dr Andy Hamilton, Taking Boys Seriously Research Associate**

There is nothing inherently wrong with boys and young men. It is our systems and structures that need to change to address the education attainment gap, with a focus on those males faced with multiple barriers to educational participation and progression. The statistics presented in the report reinforce the urgency for strategic action. The issue is not new and to increase the participation and success of male students in higher education, action is required throughout the educational pipeline from early years onto lifelong learning.

Ulster University's Taking Boys Seriously longitudinal research, in partnership with Dr Alex Blower, founder of Boys' Impact, has been connecting research with practice and pedagogical developments in diverse educational settings to support better outcomes for boys and young men. An educational ecosystem approach, facilitated by a network of regional Boys' Impact Hubs gathering around the Taking Boys Seriously 10 Principles of relational education, offers a model of cross-sectoral collaboration.<sup>80</sup> These Hubs bring together universities, schools, colleges, youth and community organisations, educational bodies and private sector partners committed to tackling the issues for boys and men in education. Alongside this, political leadership is required to scrutinise and advance the policy environment, to champion policies that adequately resource and scale effective approaches to improving outcomes for boys and men in education.

We need more working-class males pursuing careers in the teaching, helping and caring professions. As alluded to throughout the paper, meaningful education requires much more than a transaction of knowledge. To achieve progress in tackling the persistent trend of diminished educational attainment of boys culminating in the underrepresentation of males in higher education and certain employment sectors, approaches to teaching and learning must engage the whole person. It is in this sense that the notion of holistic outcomes for boys and men in education is pivotal. This includes exploring themes of masculinities, becoming a man, relationships between the sexes and gender diversity. Organisations including

Progressive Masculinity and YouthAction Northern Ireland are leading the way and supporting schools through the delivery of participative sessions with boys and educators that promote critical thinking and gender equality.

Grassroots initiatives implemented by schools and youth and community organisations have been building momentum for change from the ground up. The Taking Boys Seriously research echoes the appeal of this HEPI Report for high-level policymaking with a ministerial remit and commitment to meet these initiatives in the middle, providing a sustainable structure for the development of work with boys and men.

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March 2025 978-1-915744-42-5

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Printed by BCQ, Buckingham

Typesetting: Steve Billington, [www.jarmanassociates.co.uk](http://www.jarmanassociates.co.uk)

**HEPI Report 188**