

*Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Workplace Relations
Inquiry into the education of boys*

From Professor Lyn Yates and the University of Technology, Sydney Faculty of Education

The issues addressed by this inquiry, ‘social, cultural and educational factors affecting boys’, and ‘the social and educational outcomes for boys, and the personal and social consequences’ are ones that have been the subject of considerable research attention in recent years. In this submission we wish to comment briefly on a number of key issues, and we have also attached a list of recent writings and projects undertaken by UTS staff which are relevant to the committee’s deliberations.

The issues we comment on in this submission are:

- the importance of working with existing gender equity policy
- achievement and retention: the importance of directing resources to the groups who need it most
- changing forms of work: implications for boys and for school programs
- changing social and cultural values: impact on boys, need for professional development of teachers
- schooling and schools as institutions: (1) the problem for boys of the increased emphasis on standards and outcomes; (2) the middle school problem and the need for some different programs; (3) violence, harassment and victimisation – the need for programs to address these.

Broadly, we support continued attention to gender and its effects in schooling; to the ways school affects the self-image as well as the work outcomes of students, and to schooling and inequalities generally; and we welcome further attention to boys at school today as part of this process. We consider it is important that this work be pursued in a way that builds on the foundation of existing gender equity policies and that does take account of the research we have about good pedagogical practices, and the bigger picture; and not approached as a short-term and reflex response to vocal lobbies.

**1. Achievement issues and public debates about boys:
the importance of disaggregating, and of not treating boys as a uniform group.**

It is not true that all boys are doing poorly at school, and it is not true that ‘boys’ is the best way of describing those who are currently doing worst from schooling. Aboriginal boys and girls; boys and girls in rural areas; and boys and girls from low income families and in low income areas are better ways of describing the current ‘losers’ in the system. Within these groups, boys are doing particularly poorly, and this needs attention. But *it is important when resources are to be put into this area of concern (improving achievement and retention) that it be directed to the groups who need it most.*

In terms of the broader ways schools shape students sense of self, and their outcomes, we do welcome the continued attention to gender, signalled by this inquiry. Boys as well as girls continue to be strongly affected by values about masculinity and femininity, and it is

appropriate that in school they have some opportunity to examine these processes. But it is also important to not operate as if boys are a uniform group, and to develop programs that are appropriate to boys from different backgrounds and in different contexts.

2. The changing forms of work and its impact.

One background to the new concerns about boys and men today is the major changes that have taken place in the range and nature of jobs: the loss of many areas of traditional ‘men’s work’, the different knowledge and skills required today by many areas of work, different requirements for entering work, along with the demise of the life-long job or career. These changes have affected many boys in their relation to schooling (though they have less effect on boys intending to continue to traditional professional degrees or newer degrees in economics, finance, etc.; and many boys, especially from more privileged backgrounds, continue to do this very successfully).

In many jobs today, there is a different relation of mental and manual labour than we are used to; a need for workers to not just have certain skills, but to be able to go on monitoring, learning and changing these; and more of the ‘self’ (interpersonal skills, self-presentation etc) is seen as relevant by employers when they hire or make decisions about retaining workers.¹

In terms of schooling, especially in the middle and senior secondary years, many boys are attracted to subjects that are seen by them as work related, but they often have a limited conception of what ‘work-related’ looks like. Some implications for this inquiry of this are *the need to take seriously the nature of ‘working knowledge’ today* (that is, that it includes tacit and personal components; and flexibility and orientation to learning; as well as starting skills and knowledge). Many boys (and girls) at school have part-time jobs – they do not lack the ‘experience’ of being at work – but they do need what schooling does in those middle and senior years to give a broader foundation to their ability to keep on working, but to do this in a way that is seen by them as relevant – and as doing something they don’t already know. This suggests continued support for but further evaluation of the vocational education components of schooling. It also suggests some re-packaging of subjects might be of value. One example here might be the issue of ‘personal’ development. In so far as this is seen by boys as simply the school’s attempt to tell them what kind of person they should be, it has been resisted by many of them. But the issues here are going to affect boys’ working lives and ability to get and retain jobs, as well as their social lives. It might also signal the need to take a more open orientation to retention issues, and to consider the possibilities of a range of learning settings and entry points for both work and education today.

¹ The UTS key university research strength, RAVL (Research in Adult and Vocational Learning), and the Centre for Vocational Education and Training (Director, Dr John McIntyre) have an ongoing focus on these issues of changing work forms and entry to work patterns. Two other research groups in the UTS faculty, CERG (Change and Education Research Group) research group and Centre for Popular Education have a research focus on issues related to boys, masculinity, drugs and health education, community education, pathways through school, and gender issues in schools. Professor Lyn Yates, Dr Debra Hayes and Dr Lori Beckett are key researchers in this area, see list attached to this submission

3. Changing social and cultural values and their impact.

The impact of girls and women claiming a right to be equal and their changing educational and work patterns is something that has affected all boys. Many different studies have shown that many boys today are much less clear about their future and their place in the world than they would have been in the past. And many studies would suggest that though most boys today formally accept girls' equality and academic success, many find this uncomfortable in terms of their own quest to have a sense of what 'boys' do, and who 'boys' are. In some cases, girls very success at school leads boys to direct their efforts elsewhere – to avoid the ignominy of coming second. This is a world in transition. It is important that boys learn to accept girls as equals, and one means of this may be reducing the emphasis on 'boys versus girls'.

Equally, *it is important that all students have some sense that they are valued and that they have a future, and there is evidence that many boys today do not perceive their teachers as transmitting those views.* It is important that schools and teachers operate in ways that is more open to difference among the students; and do not quickly stamp on students who are not conforming to a single model of being a good student; that there be a more positive orientation to boys from poorer areas; and more diversity of programs supported for them. It is important too that schools, teachers and students not convey a sense that there is only one way of being a successful boy, or a real man. To turn around these ways of operating requires professional development programs.

One set of issues for boys today does revolve around 'masculinity' and what this is. Many writers have pointed out the huge emphasis in Australia on images of sporting stars as the main embodiment of desirable masculinity, and the effects this has on a wider range of values (emphasizing strength, toughness, winning), and on the low self-esteem of boys who do not measure up in terms of their size, or their sexuality, or their interests. Sport is a good part of life; valuable to many who participate; and important to our sense of our local and national community. But it is important that schools handle sport and sporting teams in ways that show these as only one of a number of ways of being that are valued; and that they do not allow school teams special privileges in relation to bullying and harassment.

4. Schooling and schools as institutions.

Three key issues that have been raised in relation to boys and schooling are:

- Achievement patterns, especially in relation to literacy, and the problem of boys dropping further behind
- Retention, truancy and alienation, especially in the middle high school years
- Violence, harassment and victimisation, both to boys and by boys.

Much research has been done on each of these issues, and here we wish only to signal a few points that warrant further particular attention:

1. On **achievement** patterns: *one factor that may be contributing to the problem for boys here is the broader policies and debates affecting schools in recent years, and, in particular, the much greater emphasis on outcomes, on competition between schools, and on public discussion of results and standards.* These things may or may not be good things in

themselves, but they put much greater pressure on those who are not achieving at a particular point by both school and family. The issue of boys being slower to achieve similar literacy levels to girls in the early years is not new. What is new is the greater public scrutiny and *parental anxiety* about what is happening. So at primary level, boys today may be being given less developmental space – that is, time to work towards literacy – and being faced with *being labelled* as not academically capable at a premature stage. At the end of school, in terms of year 12 results, the media reporting often gives a highly exaggerated sense of what is happening and the extent to which boys are doing poorly; partly by focussing too much on minor movements among the very top students (girls versus boys), and partly by lack of attention to the different routes students are choosing, and the fact that many boys are deliberately leaving school or choosing a TAFE route into higher education. This media discussion in turn influences both the anxiety of parents, and the perceptions and worries of boys about their future.

2. The **middle school** problem. (We are pleased to note and strongly support the concurrent inquiry by the NSW Department of Education and Training into the middle-school curriculum.)

Our own research as well as a range of other recent Australian research has reiterated that the middle-school (or middle high-school) phase does need attention. From students' point of view, they are in their mid teenage years, physically nearing maturity, and often holding down a part-time job, yet forced to go every day to a compulsory institution which constrains and disciplines them like young children, and which teaches them subjects they find repetitive and uninteresting. Both boys and girls make similar criticisms of schooling in this phase, but for girls their experience is more likely to be mitigated by the social aspect of schooling, their relations with friends there. Boys are more likely to react in ways that brings more punitive responses; to decide to leave school if they can; and to build up for themselves an identity with teachers that is going to work against a productive schooling relationship in the senior years. A number of private schools have long recognized this middle school problem by taking year 9 students out of the normal school to a quite different experience (Geelong Grammar's Timbertop is a longstanding example). We think it would be valuable to have all schools *explore* their own *options for offering some different experiences in this phase*. Clearly public schools do not generally have the resources to follow the expensive programs some private schools have set in place. But the issue is important for boys and for all schools, both in relation to curriculum (they should see it as a time when they are not simply doing more of the same in a rather unchallenging way); and in relation to institutional arrangements and discipline (this is the time when boys in particular most chafe against the routines and sanctions).

3. **Violence, harrassment and victimisation.**

These issues are the ones with the most immediately serious consequences for boys – related to suicide, truancy, and long-term patterns of feelings of low self-worth and anti-social behaviour. This issue has particularly affected homosexual boys (whether or not others recognize them as such – it shapes their own concerns about themselves and their future), as well as boys who are labelled and victimized as such, whether or not they are homosexual. It often affects boys from a minority culture in a particular school; or boys who are otherwise 'different'; and of course is often also directed at girls (both particular girls, and girls as a group). For those who are doing the bullying, there is the problem of beginning a pattern of

behaviour with negative long-term consequences, both personal and for the community. ***This is an area which needs further professional development programs for all schools.***

The points in this submission arise from the research and projects with schools and community organizations with which UTS faculty have been involved, and a list of some of this is attached. We would of course be happy to provide further, more detailed or specific input, if this is needed.

Professor Lyn Yates
On behalf of UTS Faculty of Education.

UTS PROJECTS AND PUBLICATIONS RELATING TO THE *EDUCATION OF BOYS INQUIRY*:

PROJECTS:

The 12 to 18 Project (1993-2001) : *(funded by Australia Research Council Large Grants, and supported by UTS, Deakin University and La Trobe University)*

Professor Lyn Yates, UTS and Dr Julie McLeod, Deakin University

Currently completing this seven-year qualitative longitudinal project of students at different schools in Victoria who began secondary school in 1993, and who have now finished school. The project is focussed on students sense of their gendered identity today; the effects different schools have on different students' values, achievements and outcomes; and the pathways through which students think about and make decisions about their future.

Exploring positive cross-gender and cross-ethnic peer relations in middle secondary schooling: a pilot study (1999) *(funded by small ARC Grant)*

Professor Lyn Yates, UTS and Dr Andrea Allard, University of South Australia:

Explored what girls and boys gained from friendships with each other; compared with same-sex friendships; and what the school environment was doing to assist positive relationships.

Are they all the same? A project to examine the success rates of adolescent males in education in secondary and tertiary settings) (1999-2000) *(funded by DETYA Evaluations and Investigations program)*

(Chief Investigator: Professor Faith Trent, Flinders University; Professor Lyn Yates, UTS: steering committee member)

This project is investigating both high and low retention settings for boys in SA, and includes survey data; extensive focus group interviews, data-base work, etc. Has gathered some interesting data on what boys are saying about what turns them off school.

Factors influencing educational performances of males and females in school and their destinations after leaving school*(funded by DETYA)*

(Professor Jane Kenway, Uni SA, Dr Cherry Collins, Deakin, Dr Julie McLeod, Deakin University; Professor Lyn Yates, UTS, adviser.)

A major multi-pronged review of the literature and research evidence

Rethinking health education: towards critical practice. *(funded by UTS research grant)*

Dr Lori Beckett, UTS

This project investigates teachers' knowledge of youth health, and gender, health inequalities and pedagogy; with a data collation and mapping of youth health inequalities..

Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (1998-2000) *(funded by Qld Dept of Education*

(Professor Alan Luke, UQ Professor Bob Lingard, UQ, Dr Martin Mills, UQ, Assoc Prof Jennifer Gore, Newcastle, Dr James Ladwig, Newcastle, Dr Debra Hayes, UTS))

An extended quantitative and qualitative study of how different pedagogic practices, school organisational capacities and systemic supports affect the learning of different students.

The Integration of Computer Based Learning in Schools Project (*funded by NSW DET*)
Dr Debra Hayes, UTS

Case studies analysing the integration of computer-based learning in NSW government schools, incorporating detailed classroom observations of learning designs and descriptions of student engagement.

PUBLICATIONS:

(Beckett)

Beckett, L. (in press), 'Education, health and welfare', *Australian Education Researcher*.

Beckett, L. (forthcoming), 'Teaching boys: empowering pedagogies', in W.Martino and R.Meyenn (eds), *Masculinities in Schools*, Open University Press.

Beckett, L. (2000), *Everyone's learning. A discussion paper on equity and pedagogy*. NSW DET: Training and Development Directorate.

Beckett, L. (ed) (1998), *Everyone is special. A Handbook for teachers on sexuality education*. Brisbane: Australian Women Educators.

(Hayes)

Hayes, D.N. (in press)

'Genealogical tales about educational provision in Australia since colonisation. Tracing the descent of discourses of gender equity', *Australian Education Researcher*.

Hayes, D,N. (1999)

'When numbers count: the erasure of women's equity status in higher education', *Australian Educational Researcher* 28 (4), 273-282.

Hayes, D.N. (1999)

'The displacement of girls as the educationally disadvantaged subject – a genealogical tale', *Change: Transformations in Education*, 1 (2), 7-15.

(McIntyre and RCVET)

McIntyre,J., Freeland,J., Melville,B. & Schwenke,C. (1999)

Early School Leavers at Risk (ANTA).

(Yates)

Yates, Lyn and Leder, Gilah (1995)

'The Student Pathways Project: a study of large data-bases and gender equity' *Unicorn*, 21 (4), 1995: 39-47.

Yates, Lyn and Leder, Gilah (1996)

Student Pathways: a review and overview of national data-bases on gender equity , Report to the Gender Equity Task Force of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, ACT Department of Education and Training, Canberra, 1996. (257pp)

Yates, Lyn (1997)

'Gender equity and the boys debate: what sort of challenge is it?', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18 (3), 337-347.

Yates, Lyn (1999)

'Transitions and the year 7 experience: a report from the 12 to 18 Project', *Australian*

- Journal of Education*, 43 (1), 38-55.
- McLeod, Julie and Yates, Lyn (1998)
‘How young people think about self, work and futures’, *Family Matters*, 49, 28-33
- Yates, Lyn (2000)
‘The “facts of the case”: gender equity for boys as a public policy issue’, in N. Lesko (ed) *Masculinities at School*, Sage, NY, 305-322.
- Allard, A. and Yates, Lyn, (forthcoming)
‘Exploring positive cross-gender peer relations: year 10 students’ perspectives on friendship’, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*.