

Women-only scholarships: should they be discontinued?

With women now enrolling in tertiary education and completing qualifications at greater rates than men, is it time to do away with women-only scholarships? On these pages **PAUL CALLISTER** and **ANALIESE JACKSON** debate the issue

Past their use-by date

PAUL CALLISTER argues that the need for women-only scholarships has now passed



One societal goal that is generally agreed upon both nationally and internationally is that discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ethnicity, age, family status or gender is unacceptable.

LAST WEEK THE Human Rights Commission (HRC) issued a press release stating that, if provided by charitable trusts, women-only (or men-only) scholarships are not illegal.

Charitable trusts are exempt in certain respects from the Human Rights Act 1993, so they can offer scholarships to whom-ever they choose.

The Human Rights Commission's press release followed debate in the media about whether such scholarships are still needed to assist in overcoming discrimination, or whether they are now, themselves, discriminatory. While the statement helps clarify the legality of gender-differentiated scholarships, it sheds no light on whether such scholarships are still justified. My view is that if scholarships are designed to help overcome disadvantage, they should focus directly on disadvantage. Gender is no longer the predictor of disadvantage that it once was.

The question I posed to the Human Rights Commission about women-only scholarships needs to be set against a backdrop of changes in tertiary education. Trends over time can be examined using a number of measures, including Ministry of Education enrolment and completion data, and census data. The New Zealand University Students' Association, in a press release, claimed that using completions data to assess relative outcomes for men and women was a 'controversial' methodology. However, as part of a project funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology entitled, "Missing men", we are examining a broad range of data.

There has been a dramatic increase in tertiary education enrolments since World War II, with particularly strong growth since the 1980s. Whether this growth has been sufficient, or in the right areas, to help New Zealand reach a goal of full employment with high incomes is the subject of ongoing debate. What is clear is that women have been improving their tertiary education participation and com-

pletions faster than men and have now overtaken them.

And what is also apparent is that, despite improvements, a disproportionate number of young Maori and Pacific people, particularly young men, do not reach tertiary education or fail if they do. In fact, far too many young people from these groups still leave school with few or no formal qualifications. These education patterns are part of the reason why the hourly pay gap is larger between European women and Maori men (in favour of women) than between men and women overall (in favour of men).

We have a number of preliminary papers on the Institute of Policy Studies' website that set out trends in participation and achievement in education. For example, Table 1 uses 2006 education data to show that women outnumbered men in all levels of tertiary enrolments and completions in 2006. For Maori and Pacific communities the changes in favour of women have been even stronger.

Census data confirm that gains for women have been particularly strong among younger cohorts who are currently in the early stages of their careers. For example, in 2006 in the 25-34 age group there were 75,000 women with a degree or higher qualification in contrast to just under 52,000 men. The NZUSA suggests that we should not only look at degrees or higher credentials as young men might be making sensible choices not to pursue such qualifications. But Level 1 to Level 6 certificates and diplomas in this same group show a similar picture, with 131,000 women holding such qualifications in contrast to 125,000 men. The census data also show that in all five-year age groups from 20 to 49 years of age in 2006, there were significantly more men than women with no formal educational qualifications.

This gain in educational achievement for women is not just a recent trend. Research undertaken at Massey University by Stephen Summers shows that there have been more women than men enrolled in university courses since 1985. Change has been slower at the highest levels of study, but for the past three years women have matched men in terms of doctoral completions. Overall, in the whole tertiary sector more women than men were enrolled by the mid-1990s.

If the goal for women is reaching equality of opportunity to participate in tertiary education then, at this broad level, it was reached quite some time ago. An even tighter measure, equality of outcome, has also been reached.

But then the argument goes that women are under-represented in key areas of tertiary education and need special support in those areas. Our analysis of the data shows that there remain just three broad areas

where women remain under-represented. These are engineering, architecture and building, and agriculture. But men are under-represented in most areas of study, with particular under-representation in health and education. Health covers a wide range of areas of study including nursing, in which most students are female, to medical training where around 60 per cent of graduates are female. Education also covers a range of study including early childhood, where almost all those training are female.

This raises a number of questions. For example, if it is an important goal for half of all engineers to be female, should we not be equally concerned that almost all nurses and most primary school teachers are female? Does education itself lead to gendered occupational choices, or do future labour market prospects guide choices? Perhaps there is a perception that discrimination is rife in certain occupations or some areas do not support work-life balance. Alternatively, women and men may be making sensible individual choices. Possibly the perception that women can only achieve in education if they are provided with special supports sends subtle signals to employers that women are not as capable as men and should be paid less. Some of these questions and hypotheses can be examined by research but others can only be answered by debate about societal goals, and what men and women want.

One societal goal that is generally agreed upon both nationally and internationally is that discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as ethnicity, age, family status or gender is unacceptable. It is possible, and legal, to introduce special measures, such as gender-specific scholarships, to help overcome disadvantage. However, it is also generally agreed in the literature on affirmative action measures and in international human rights conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, that these special measures should cease when the goal of equality of opportunities, or of outcomes, in a particular area has been achieved (CEDAW, Article 4.1).

If special measures last too long, then instead of helping overcome discrimination, they themselves become discriminatory.

While women-only scholarships offered by charitable trusts are a legal form of discrimination, it is my view that this discrimination is no longer justified. If scholarships are won through merit, merit itself will determine who gains them. If they are offered in the pursuit of creating a fairer society, then in our current circumstances they should be based on need, not gender.

Paul Callister is senior research fellow and acting deputy director in the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University.

Table 1: Women as a percentage of enrolments and completions in tertiary education, 2006

	Enrolments	Completions
Level 1-3 Certificate	50	59
Level 4 Certificate	50	65
Level 5-7 Diploma	62	63
Level 7 Bachelors	60	63
Level 8 Honours/Postgraduate certificate/diploma	64	65
Level 9 Masters	58	58
Level 10 Doctorate	52	51

Keep the scholarships

There are still good reasons to keep women-only scholarships, says **ANALIESE JACKSON**



Just as with any other scholarship, women-only scholarships provide financial support in an increasingly expensive education system, however, no scholarships are awarded solely on the basis of gender.

A RECENT LETTER to the Human Rights Commission by Dr Paul Callister of Victoria University has questioned whether scholarships for women to pursue tertiary education are still relevant in today's educational environment. Dr Callister's assertion that "Gender is no longer the clear marker of disadvantage that it once was", suggests that scholarships aimed solely at women are now essentially redundant. However, to the recipients of these scholarships, to those administering them, and to many in the tertiary sector, there remain many reasons as to why it is imperative that scholarships that have been established for women to succeed in their tertiary studies continue to be offered.

Central to Dr Callister's challenge to scholarships for women is the claim that with higher numbers of women now participating in tertiary education, equality has been achieved and therefore targeted assistance is no longer required. Yet how do you determine that the goal of 'equality' has been reached?

If 'equality' is based solely on the statistics of who is currently participating, then it would appear to some that women have reached their aim of equality. The 2006 New Zealand Census told us that women now outnumber men in tertiary education: approximately 57 per cent of those aged 15 or above who are engaging in tertiary studies are women. If you compared this number to statistics from 1971, where only 29.8 per cent of those participating in tertiary education were women, or 1987 where that figure was 47.1 per cent, you may be inclined to say that the current numbers suggest that this increase is very positive for women. And, generally speaking, you'd be right.

However, it has taken over 20 years for just 10 per cent more women to enter higher education and women have only made up more than half of the tertiary population for just ten years. There is no guarantee that these increased participation rates will continue to occur in our tertiary sector.

Just as with any other scholarship, women-only scholarships provide financial support in an increasingly expensive education system, however, no scholarships are awarded solely on the basis of gender. Many, such as the New Horizons For Women Second Chance Education Award, take into account the socio-economic background of the recipient, their contribution to the local community or life circumstances which may have inhibited their participation in the tertiary sector prior to their application. Others, such as Te Tuapapa o Te Iwi, enable Maori women, who, historically, have been disadvantaged in the tertiary sector, to participate, thus adding to the diversity of our tertiary sector and, better yet, our workforce. Surely these women deserve a chance to better themselves in life? Without the financial assistance that these scholarships provide, it would be highly unlikely that these women would be able to participate in the levels that they are currently. Eradicating what may be considered an educational lifeline to such students is not beneficial to women or men.

It is also very important to acknowledge the fact that scholarships aimed at women are also enabling women to enter fields in which they have been historically under-represented. Despite the higher number of women participating in tertiary education generally, there are a number of areas of study that have very low female participation rates. One such example is science, where the lack of female participation in science-related courses is naturally mirrored in the workplace. The 2008 Census of Women's Participation, launched earlier this year, states the following:

"Women in New Zealand are under-represented in the hard sciences, such as physics, chemistry, engineering and mathematics... Women also make up a relatively small percentage of top science academics and this limits influence at major decision-making levels within universities including research leadership" (Census of Women's Participation; 79).

While it is evident that more women are participating in tertiary education than previously, they are by no means spread evenly across the various fields of study. By taking away scholarships enticing women to study in such fields, there may be little incentive or encouragement for women to participate within them. The financial provisions to enable them to participate in these fields benefits society once more, as women are able to contribute to a diverse and representative workforce.

Finally, a key issue to consider is the viability of using completion rates as a measure of success amongst tertiary students.

Dr Callister presents completion and retention rates of women as evidence of their success, and men's disadvantage, asserting that this should lead to the review of women-only scholarships; however it is important to note that students' patterns of participation have undergone much change in recent times. More and more students, whether they be men or women, are now involved in other forms of higher education than ever before, with many undertaking certificate and diploma level study at institutes of technology and polytechnics as well as enrolling in modern apprenticeships. There are now also many more part-time students than in previous

years, some of whom are doing only one or two papers with no intention of ever completing a full programme of study. Many are simply choosing to complete individual courses, rather than an entire qualification that they may not want or need. Others must juggle work or family commitments whilst completing their qualifications.

These students may well be highly successful in their individual studies, but could still be regarded as 'incomplete' by their tertiary institution. It's entirely possible that men make up a significant proportion of students following such patterns of participation, especially when you consider the increase in participation in modern apprenticeships.

While there continues to be a need, individuals and organisations will continue to provide support for women in education – just as is the case for a variety of other scholarships aimed at addressing other particular needs.

What's more, Dr Callister's argument that fewer men achieving degree-level qualifications is problematic as it raises the question of elitism: are students who do some study but do not complete a full degree, or who undertake other forms of tertiary education, considered less valuable in our society than those who do complete a degree? We don't think so. What we as a nation are seeing is a change in participation in higher education, and while there may be challenges within this, these changes are often very beneficial to society in general.

The increased participation of women in tertiary education is a cause for celebration, however there is still work to be done on inequities for women within the tertiary sector, and women-only scholarships are one of many vehicles that can be utilised to address such issues.

Crucially, we have not yet seen similar success in the workplace as we have in education, which indicates there is still so much to be learnt. New Zealand continues to have a prevailing gender pay gap and many issues with both vertical and horizontal occupational segregation. While there continues to be a need, individuals and organisations will continue to provide support for women in education – just as is the case for a variety of other scholarships aimed at addressing other particular needs.

Rather than challenges to legitimate initiatives, such as women-only scholarships, criticism of the harsh user-pays tertiary environment is what is really needed. This is one of the main contributing factors to the financial burden and barriers facing students – not who is targeted by which scholarship.

In the meantime, and in order to protect the integrity of our tertiary education system, it is essential that we continue to support women in the pursuit of higher education by retaining women-only scholarships.

Analiese Jackson is the women's rights officer for the New Zealand Union of Students Associations.

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