

6. Are boys in Canada being left behind?

Yes and no - but mostly no.

In terms of educational attainment, girls in Canada have been making gains relative to boys for some time (see Chart 4).²⁴

- Women overtook men to become a majority of university undergraduates in the early 1990s and in 2012-13 comprised 57 percent of the undergraduate student population.²⁵
- Women have comprised a majority of master's students since 1994-95 and of all graduate students since 1998-99. However, men still predominate in doctoral programs – although the proportion of males at that level has fallen from 62 to 53 percent over the past 15 years.

Viewed in these terms, boys' traditional educational advantage relative to girls has been reversed.

But this does not mean boys are actually doing worse than they were before. In fact, the opposite is case: boys have never been as successful in completing both high school and university than they are today. Over the two decades between

1990s and 2009, the proportion of men aged 25-34 who had completed high school rose from 77.5 percent to 90.5 percent, while the proportion with a university degree rose from 15.6 percent to 26.0 percent.²⁶

The growing advantage that girls have over boys in terms of graduation rates, therefore, is explained not by the fact that boys are doing worse, but rather by the fact that the educational attainment of girls is improving more rapidly.²⁷

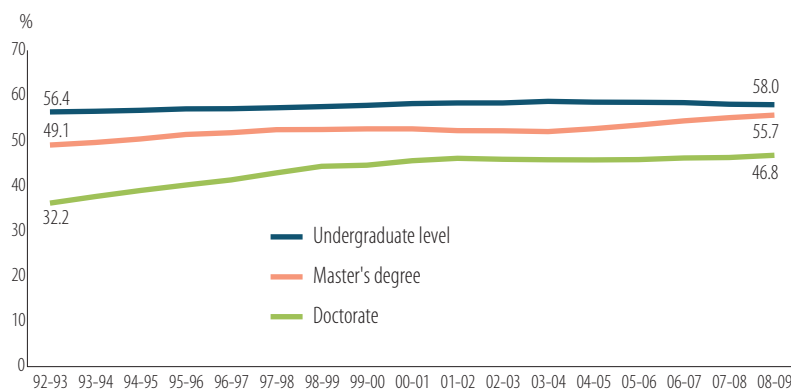
In terms of educational achievement, there is also no compelling evidence to suggest that boys are falling behind.

It is well known, of course, that girls perform better in reading assessments than do boys.

- In the Grade 4 international reading literacy study (PIRLS), Canadian girls (average score of 555) scored better than boys (average score of 542); however the 12 point difference was smaller than the international average (16 point score difference in favour of girls).²⁸

Chart 4
Proportion of Female University Students

By Level of Study (1992-2009)



Source: CANSIM Table 477-0013

²⁴ Note that the data series reported in Chart 4 was discontinued after 2008-09; data from CANSIM series 447-003 indicate no significant change in the years after 2008-09, with women continuing to comprise about 57 percent of university undergraduates, 56 percent of masters' students and 47 percent of doctoral students.

²⁵ The 2012-13 figure is from Statistic's Canada's CANSIM database No. 4770033. The CANSIM database used as source for Chart 4 was discontinued after 2008-09.

²⁶ The corresponding figures for women age 25 to 34 are: from 80.6 to 93.4 for high school completion, and from 15.0 to 34.3 percent for university. Data from Statistics Canada (Labour Force Survey) as reported at: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-503-x/2010001/article/11542/tbl/tbl001-eng.htm>

- Similarly, in the past round of PISA, girls in Canada scored an average of 35 points higher than boys – slightly less than the average 38 point gap across the OECD as a whole.²⁹

In math, however, boys retain an advantage over girls: Canadian boys had a ten point edge over girls in the 2012 PISA math component (the average difference in favour of boys in the OECD was 11 points). And in science, boys and girls performed similarly, with Canadian boys enjoying a slim 3 point edge.

Note that in all three PISA domains, the gender gaps have remained relatively stable over time; thus is no evidence that the performance of boys is in decline relative to that of girls.

In short, then, girls do better than boys in some subjects, and vice versa, and this situation seems relatively stable over time. Gender gaps in Canada also are in line with international norms.

The OECD has also argued convincingly that the early advantage that girls have over boys in some subjects does not translate into an edge in careers, especially in science related fields, as cultural norms limit girls' aspirations, confidence and the encouragement they receive as they age.³⁰

Finally, it is not yet clear whether the introduction of new information and computer technologies into the classroom will have any impact on gender differences in performance. A computer-based component of the PISA 2012 reading assessment found that girls still perform better than boys, but by a smaller margin than is the case for the conventional paper-based assessment.³¹ At the same time, however, the ICILS study of overall computer and information literacy found that girls actually score higher than boys, both in Canada and internationally.³²

²⁷ And much of this trend has less to do with the obstacles that boys face at school but with the relative advantages that men with lower levels of education have in the labour market compared to similarly educated women.

²⁸ I.V.S. Mullis, M.O. Martin, P. Foy and K.T. Drucker, PIRLS 2011: International Results in Reading (Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College, 2012), p. 52; see <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/international-results-pirls.html>

²⁹ Data obtained from various tables in the OECD 2012 PISA report (Volume I); see http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeecd/education/pisa-2012-results-what-students-know-and-can-do-volume-i-revised-edition-february-2014/pisa-2012-data_9789264208780-12-en#,p.102

³⁰ See: OECD, "What Lies Behind Gender Inequality in Education." PISA In Focus No. 49, available at <http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/5js4xffh30.pdf?expires=1426015474&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=B6FF0646492C65BD505F8B91DC9508C7>

³¹ Brochu, Deussing, Houme, and Chuy, *Measuring Up*, pp. 41-43

³² Labrecque and Dionne, ICILS 2013, pp. 18-19