

Job prospects fear as boys shun university

Men face a struggle for good jobs in future as growing numbers of teenage boys shun university, Government officials have warned.

Ministers are becoming increasingly concerned at the widening gender gap in higher education, after 22,500 more young women than men won university places last year.

Higher education officials warned that men could find themselves marginalised in the jobs market as employers increasingly look to hire staff with degrees.

In evidence to an inquiry by MPs, the Government also raised fears that progress at getting more working class students into university may be levelling off.

The concerns emerged at a time of major upheaval in higher education, with undergraduates being charged top-up tuition fees of £3,000 a year for the first time.

In a document sent to the Commons education select committee, the Government said: "Gradual progress has been made in broadening the social mix of the student population, but progress has been slow and there are signs that it may be starting to level off.

"The social class gap in participation remains the biggest single issue, although we are increasingly concerned about male participation."

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce) warned that university, once dominated by young men, was becoming increasingly the preserve of women.

Hefce chief executive Professor David Eastwood said: "It matters in the sense that it mattered when it was the other way around.

"The wider worry is that if we are not careful we are going to arrive at a position where young lads are alienated, they are under-skilled and, given everything we say about the nature of the knowledge economy and the premium that will be placed on graduate skills, they will find themselves disadvantaged in the labour market."

Prof Eastwood dismissed the idea of gender quotas for university places to address the problem.

But he added: "We need to understand better why this is happening and start taking some action sooner rather than later."

Ministers have set a target to get 50 per cent of young people into higher education.

Figures last year showed 47 per cent of 17-30 year-old women had entered higher education by 2004, compared to just 37 per cent of young men.

Last year, 57 per cent of first degree graduates were women.