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To cite this article: Kadri Aavik & Meril Ümarik (2019): The ‘exceptional male teacher’ and the ‘vulnerable male student’: constructions of men and masculinities in vocational education and training in Estonia, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, DOI: 10.1080/13636820.2019.1586751

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2019.1586751

Published online: 08 Mar 2019.
The ‘exceptional male teacher’ and the ‘vulnerable male student’: constructions of men and masculinities in vocational education and training in Estonia

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ABSTRACT
This article takes a critical perspective on the construction of men and masculinities in vocational education and training (VET). We focus on ways in which key stakeholders in VET – teachers, heads of schools and VET experts – conceptualise men as educators and learners in VET, drawing on the case of Estonia. We identified two related discourses produced by the stakeholders which we labelled as ‘the exceptional male teacher’ and ‘the vulnerable male student’, which draw on and support the broader discourse of ‘feminisation of education’ prevalent in many Western societies. Treating men as exceptional, vulnerable and deserving special attention in VET leaves unchallenged and reproduces male privilege and endorses traditional ways of doing masculinity in this context. Such an institutional environment produced by the VET stakeholders may not be conducive to the emergence of more egalitarian masculinities in VET schools. More broadly, these two discourses on men in VET have important implications for gendered power relations and possibilities to advance gender equality in VET and in the labour market.

Introduction

Most existing work on gender in vocational education and training (VET) has focused predominantly on women and girls (see for example Phipps 2008; Miller and Vetter 1996; Butler and Ferrier 2000; Shan, Liu and Li 2015). Men and masculinities have remained less discussed in this context (see for example Korp 2011, Kimmel 2010; Moret, Dahinden, and Duemmler 2012; Jørgensen 2015; Mac an Ghaill 1999).

This article advances existing knowledge on men and masculinities in VET. We focus on ways in which key stakeholders in VET – teachers, heads of VET institutions and VET experts – construct masculinities in VET, drawing on the case of Estonia. We ask: how do these stakeholders conceptualise men (as teachers and students) in the Estonian VET system? What are the implications of these discursive constructions for gendered power relations and possibilities to advance gender equality in VET?
Thus far, VET systems in many countries, certainly in Central Eastern Europe, have not paid explicit attention to advancing gender equality. Yet, VET systems are known to (re)produce structural gender inequalities in the society.\(^1\) With this paper, we aim to contribute to a broader discussion on equality and equal opportunities in VET, as ‘gender injustice remains a central issue in VET and the labour market’ (Niemeyer and Colley 2015, 1).

**Men and masculinities in VET**

In popular discussions and in some academic debates on the developments in the education systems of many Western countries, including Estonia, the discourse of ‘feminisation of education’ has become prevalent (Leathwood and Read 2009, 18–19; Francis 2006, 57). This discourse refers to the presence of increasingly more women – as teachers and learners – outnumbering men in virtually all levels of education. In Estonia, for example, in 2016/17, women constituted 59% of students in higher education (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2018). In vocational education, in the same academic year, women made up 47% of learners and 52% of graduates (ibid). In general education, 85.8% of all teachers were women in 2016/17 and in vocational education this percentage was 61% (ibid). Thus, in Estonia, VET in general and particularly some segments of it may be perceived as a ‘feminised’ space.

Implicit as well as often explicit in the discourse of ‘feminisation of education’ is the idea that boys and men are losing out, as the ‘domination of women’ in education is often blamed for the underachievement of boys in this system. This parallel discourse of the ‘boy crisis’ in education has emerged in many Western countries, sometimes even assuming the proportions of a moral panic (for critical accounts on this, see Kimmel 2010; Jørgensen 2015; Epstein and Maw 1998; Smith 2003; Gilbert and Gilbert 2010; Kuurme 2010), despite the fact that men’s privileged position in the labour market and in other areas of public life remains largely unchallenged.\(^2\) Both discourses rely ‘on [a] stereotyped, binary and essentialist view of gender’ (Jørgensen 2015, 73).

We take a critical approach to discussing boys and men in VET and position this research within the field of critical studies on men and masculinities (see for example Hearn 2004), which supports feminist commitments to achieve egalitarian gender relations. Critical perspectives on men and masculinities ‘critically address men in the context of gendered power relations’, ‘naming them as men’ (Hearn 2004, 50). In line with social constructionist understanding of gender, the categories of ‘men’ and ‘masculinities’ are viewed as socially constructed and gendered power relations, which uphold men’s privilege, are problematised. While vocational education is in many countries considered a masculine space (Gilbert and Gilbert 2010, 5), men have often remained in an unmarked status in many studies on VET.
Previous studies on the construction of men’s identities and masculinities in VET are relatively few and have predominantly dealt with men as students in this context. Some of this work has focused on identity constructions of male students in VET. Moret et al’s (2012, 4) work in a Swiss vocational school found that the students constructed themselves as ‘hard-working, tough, heterosexual, economically responsible men’ and thereby drew boundaries between themselves and (imagined) other men, seen as ‘effeminate, intellectual, lazy, despicable’. This boundary work aimed ‘to counter a socially disadvantaged position on the labour market and in the society in general’ (ibid.). Steno and Friche’s (2015) analysis of the vocational habitus of Danish male cookery trainees suggests that a hybrid form of masculinity is performed and aspired to. This includes, on the one hand, elements of risky behaviour and ‘ideals of the masculine body’, as part of the profession of a chef, and on the other hand, display of compassion towards others (Steno and Friche 2015, 60). Earlier studies focusing on young men’s identity work in vocational training programmes in the UK (Mac an Ghaill 1999; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 1997) have demonstrated how these training sites shape the emergence of heterosexual identities and cultures as manifested in the male trainees’ subject positions.

Several studies have highlighted the juxtaposition of theoretical versus practical knowledge and skills in VET and the higher value placed on their latter and examine the implication of this division on the construction of masculinities in VET. For example, Korp (2011) found that students in a transport programme in Swedish VET tended to reject academic and theoretical knowledge, associated with femininity, as a source of intelligence, relying instead on proficiency in hands-on activities in constructing smartness. Niemi and Rosvall (2013) problematise the sharp separation of knowledge and work into theoretical and practical elements in Finnish and Swedish VET. They argue that this division makes it more difficult for working class men in VET to display interest in the theoretical aspects of schoolwork, as their masculinity may thereby be challenged by peers. On the other hand, distancing from the ‘theoretical’ may function as a source of positive self-identification for male learners. Male students, particularly those who had struggled in previous levels of education, characterised their VET experience as positive, compared to their earlier experiences in the education system (Jørgensen 2015), valuing the practical skills that the former offered (ibid).

Some studies have examined how the institutional environment of VET enables and shapes particular constructions of masculinities and is in turn formed by these. For example, Jørgensen (2015) has critiqued ranking systems, such as sorting of students into different courses and levels. In their examination of the Physical Recreation subject in two Australian VET institutions, Brown and Macdonald (2008) conclude that the subject enabled the (re)production of masculinist values and discourses, by encouraging aggressiveness and competitiveness, which benefited certain physically fit male students.
who were invested in ‘anti-schoolwork’ identities’ (ibid, 33). In his study on how VET settings shape working-class masculinities in the UK, Ward (2017) argues that alongside traditionally ‘masculine’ VET courses that reaffirm hegemonic versions of working-class masculinities, men’s participation in courses marked as ‘feminine’ enabled the exploration of alternative forms of masculinity, but at the same time required strategic work to counter bullying and alienation.

These studies paint a complex picture of the construction of men’s identities in VET – on the one hand, they highlight identification with traditionally masculine values and ways of being, yet also point to instances of and possibilities for doing masculinity differently. These findings point to the importance of understanding ways in which the institutional environment of VET shapes men’s experiences and identity constructions. In contrast to previous studies, rather than directly focusing on the attitudes and identity constructions of boys and men in VET, this paper turns its attention to ways in which VET stakeholders, as institutional representatives, shape the environment in which boys and men in VET produce their identities. As these constructions occur within the broader discourses of the ‘feminisation of the education system’ and ‘failing boys’, outlined earlier, our discussion in this article largely draws on stakeholder experiences from ‘feminised’ areas of VET – arts, health and services – where men are underrepresented as teachers and learners, in order to better understand how these discourses are produced.

**Contextual background: VET in Estonia from a gender perspective**

While there are virtually equal numbers of men and women learners in VET in Estonia (53% and 47%, respectively) (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2018), there is considerable gender segregation between fields of study. For example, in 2016/17, women constituted 17.5% of students in the area of information and communication technology and 23.2% of students in technology, production and construction. At the same time, men made up 10.5% of students in the area of health and wellbeing (ibid). Regarding the gender composition of teachers in VET, in 2016/17, male teachers made up 39% of the teaching force in VET (ibid), however, similarly to the student body, there is considerable gender segregation between fields of study.

The Estonian VET system, including its strategic documents, as well as VET institutions has paid little attention to questions of gender. The Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research 2014), a document that sets out priorities and activities in the sphere of education in Estonia, including on VET, makes occasional mention of gender, but does not include gender equality in its goals and in the key indicators to measure progress towards the goals.
Estonia makes an interesting case for studying masculinities in VET. While the country takes pride in and presents itself in the international arena, and particularly among post-socialist countries, as an innovative and tech-savvy small nation, progress in other matters, such as gender equality and equal opportunities, as well as gender relations on the individual level have been much slower (Pajumets 2012). This is particularly evident in the case of men, as traditional ways of doing masculinity have been observed even in novel social situations (ibid). Work and career have remained central elements in most men’s lives in Estonia.

Given this context, it is insightful to explore the construction of masculinities in VET (particularly in its more feminised areas), which, compared to other segments of the education system, has a more direct link to the labour market, as a major arena where gender inequalities are reproduced and contested in the public sphere.

Research materials and method

In this paper, we draw on data collected in 2014–2015, within the framework of an initiative to map and understand constructions of gender and perceptions towards gender inequalities by teachers and other stakeholders on all levels of education in Estonia. The authors of this paper focused on VET. We conducted qualitative semi-structured individual and focus group interviews with key stakeholders in Estonian VET. Six individual interviews were conducted with heads of vocational schools (three women and three men) and with three vocational education experts (one woman and two men) working in administrative bodies regulating VET on the national level. The length of the individual interviews was between 1–2 h. As our third set of data, we draw on three focus group interviews with 15 teachers (eight women and six men) in three VET institutions specialising in arts, health and services, where women make up the majority of student and teacher bodies. Teachers were recruited with the help of the heads of school, who suggested to us teachers who were potentially interested and available to participate in the research. Focus group interviews lasted 2–3 h. All interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and transcribed. The research followed the standard principles of social science research ethics. We obtained informed consent from our research participants and ensured their anonymity in all research outputs.

In order to identify how the interviewed VET stakeholders reproduce, reinforce and/or challenge traditional understandings of masculinities in VET, we used qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). We performed open coding on the interview transcripts, followed by a more focused coding, where we grouped codes into themes, guided by our central research questions. These themes represent characterisations of men and boys as
participants in VET. Collectively, these particular representations constitute broad discourses about men, boys and gender relations in VET.

In our understanding, ‘a discourse refers to a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events’ (Burr 1995, 48). According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), discourses are attempts to fix the meaning of signs in a particular domain. Hence, a discourse ‘is a reduction of possibilities’ (Phillips and Jørgenson 2002, 27). While discourses attempt to establish a closure, it is never complete, as their meaning can never be completely fixed, and hence can be challenged (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002, 28). Drawing on Foucault, discourse, especially when produced by privileged groups and institutions, enacts, legitimates and reproduces (or challenges) relations of power and dominance in society (van Dijk 2005, 353), including gendered power relations (Lazar 2005).

Main findings

We begin by looking at the stakeholders’ perspectives on men as teachers in VET, followed by a presentation of ways in which they constructed boys and men as learners in VET.

Men as educators in VET: discourse of the ‘exceptional male teacher’

When asked what they consider the most notable problems related to gender in VET in Estonia, stakeholders highlighted the scarcity of men as educators in Estonian vocational schools, particularly in some fields of study. This was seen as a problem particularly by female heads and teachers of vocational schools. The emergence of this discourse is not entirely surprising, as the interviewed teachers and heads of school worked in VET schools where women outnumbered men as teachers and learners.

In addition to drawing attention to the low numbers of male educators in particularly some areas of VET, they were also constructed as qualitatively different from female educators. In the following sections, we unpack how the discourse of the ‘exceptional male teacher’ was produced, focusing on its elements.

Male teachers as role models and figures of authority

Male educators were seen as valuable role models in VET to students as well as to other (prospective) male educators, partly due to their role as teachers in VET, but also merely by their presence in a vocational school as masculine subjects.

Men in VET were seen by some of their female colleagues as carrying more authority compared to female educators:
Riina, F, head of school: It is just very impactful when a man addresses the classroom, there’s nothing you can do.

This authority attributed to male teachers was seen to improve educational outcomes of students in the VET institution:

Mari, F, teacher and head of studies: The development of students often happens through their experiences with male educators. Seeing that healthy attitude to life, totally different from what you are used to. In my long experience, as the head of studies, I’ve had many first-year students come to me crying, as they encounter such different experiences with a teacher. They are totally shocked and disturbed when they encounter such a man in front of the classroom, who demands certain things with a loud and clear voice. But this first shock is soon overcome and at some point, it all seems normal and it is normal.

The uniqueness of the male teacher is conveyed here by constructing him as a figure of authority whose presence in the classroom and style of teaching may at first take students aback, but what is ultimately special, fresh, inspiring and valuable, and a rewarding experience to both male and female students. The male teacher helps to bring a ‘healthy attitude to life’ to the ‘feminised’ VET environment, where it is assumed to be lacking. Interestingly however, in these accounts, the particular elements that make the male teacher authoritative and special, remain vague. This suggests that male teachers may not be using different teaching styles, but their mere presence as men in VET settings help to make them stand out and appear as figures of authority, achieved by relying on authority as a trait traditionally associated with masculinity.

The ‘active’ male teacher
Another quality that was seen to make the male educators in VET exceptional and valuable was their perceived pro-activeness:

Riina: I have to say that despite the scarcity of men in our school, they are visible. All of them are active, in the sense that most of them participate in the activities and events taking place here, only a few of them with smaller workloads don’t.

It is notable here that this construction of male teachers as active employees in this particular school did not seem to include anything remarkable beyond their participation in the daily activities, regular duties and events of the school, as staff members. This again suggests that the mere presence of male educators in the workforce of a VET institution can make them stand out.

Another element brought up as a signal of the pro-activeness of male teachers in VET was their employment in other workplaces simultaneously:

Riina: All men who work in our school, also work somewhere else, doing several things at the same time.

This was seen as a positive sign of their pro-activeness and their ability to take on different work at the same time. There was no concern over how
successfully they are able to juggle these jobs and whether and how this might affect their commitment to the VET school they were employed at. The extra work of male teachers outside their employment in VET schools was largely justified by the low salaries that VET institutions offer, considered inadequate, particularly for men. This aspect will be further discussed in a later section.

**The ‘goal-oriented’ but ‘routine-averse’ male educator**

The interviewed stakeholders constructed male educators as more oriented towards specific goals and results, but at the same time as less tolerant of the daily work routine, in contrast with their female colleagues:

Riina: Men come here with one specific goal, they do it and then move on to do other things. As you know, men set goals and just complete them, women however start something and enjoy the whole process. [...] For men, the goal must be more in the forefront. I don’t know how many of them are willing to engage in daily routine activities to achieve these goals. [...] They come here to do very concrete things, like teaching one class. They come very willingly if everything has been arranged before. But [not] if they have to deal with all this bureaucracy, assessments and so on, in which women seem to be much better in many ways.

Men’s perceived reluctance or even inability to cope with daily routines was not seen as a significant drawback, but something rather inevitable about men and as such, simply to be accepted:

Meelis, M, head of school: By nature, men are bigger risk-takers and more bohemian. They often don’t want to deal with formalities, they can do without it. And when they encounter the Estonian state’s bureaucracy they will rather say ‘okay, I will go elsewhere then, where I can be like I want. [...] Bureaucracy is killing men. Women don’t like it either, but they just tolerate it.

It was admitted that women’s patience and perseverance – qualities that men were largely seen as lacking – enables them to remain in low-paid jobs in VET.

**The importance of the ‘male perspective’ in VET**

Particularly for female heads of school as well as for female teachers, one of the main negative implications of the scarcity of male educators in VET had to do with depriving students from ‘diverse’ and ‘different’ perspectives, allegedly provided by male educators, complementing the more prevalent ‘female perspective’ in VET:

Merle, F, head of school: A male teacher may deliver the exact same content as his female colleague, but he presents it from a different perspective, so that ultimately, students will have received both points of view and that makes them smarter.

However, the ‘male perspective’ was considered not only different, but in some cases superior, more authoritative and more inspiring. Male teachers were
characterised as representatives of ‘a healthy attitude to life’, as outlined earlier – as someone concrete, talented and rational, bringing fresh perspectives and attitudes to the ‘feminised’ school environment.

As another specific characteristic attributed to many male teachers, their different educational and experiential backgrounds were highlighted as a positive asset to the VET institution. The teachers and heads of school noted how several male colleagues have come to work in VET from other fields and/or the business sector, in many cases lacking practical teaching experience or a background in VET. This was, however, not viewed as source of concern over their potential lack of experience as teachers in VET, but rather seen as providing them with the ‘fresh’ perspective seen as innovative and much needed in VET. In highlighting the value of the ‘male perspective’ in VET, the stakeholders drew on the traditional understanding of gender as a binary, with ‘male’ and ‘female’ opposite poles. We take a closer look at this in the next section.

**Male teachers as a ‘balancing force’ in feminised VET**

The shortage of male educators in VET was seen as disrupting the desired ‘gender balance’ of staff in VET schools. This lack of gender balance was deemed to have a negative impact on the internal atmosphere of the school, the popularity of VET and its study programmes to (prospective) students and their success. The need for ‘gender balance’ was justified with the perceived differences between men and women, attributed both to nature and nurture. It was believed that different, but complementary characteristics of men and women (for example, ‘masculine’ rationality and independence, ‘feminine’ sense of collegiality and empathy) help to achieve a harmonious atmosphere in the school and act as a disciplinary force:

Merle: Whether we want it or not, we are different as women and men. This difference is enriching, it’s not that one side is better than the other.

This articulation of gender as a binary with two complementary sides, however, contradicts with the discourse of male educators as exceptional in VET, as outlined above, which implies a hierarchy where men in VET occupy a superior position.

**‘Underpaid’ male educators**

Salaries in VET – regarded as too low – were seen as the primary reason why men do not become educators in VET:

Tõnu, M, expert: I don’t know if this is dictated by nature, but men see themselves more as breadwinners and responsible for the wellbeing of their family. Thus, for them, getting a competitive salary is often more important than for women. So, men tend to choose occupations with high salaries, which enable to support their families. So this is certainly an aspect that men look at when choosing a workplace. Unfortunately, in many spheres of work, salaries are less attractive. Education is one of them.
From this understanding, it seemed justified to the stakeholders that men do not tend to seek employment in VET. Such statements reflected traditional understandings of the role of man as a breadwinner. This assumption, however, contradicts with the social reality in Estonia today where both women and men contribute to the family income. Notably, this concern did not emerge in relation to women’s wages in VET.

Overall, implicit in the discourse of the ‘underpaid’ male educator was a sense of unfairness attributed to the situation by all stakeholders. From this perspective, men who choose to work in VET are giving up other, more lucrative careers. As such, they seen as making a noble sacrifice, for which they deserve compensation, for example, in the form of extra income.

Special measures to attract/keep male educators in VET schools
Given the scarcity of male educators and their perceived exceptionality in (particular areas of) VET, their increased presence in VET schools was seen as desirable. Heads of schools and teachers discussed some measures – envisioned as well as already taken – to achieve this.

As one strategy to invite and to keep men in VET institutions, establishing and maintaining a favourable work environment for men was seen as important:

   Riina: I don’t really know how to get men to come to VET schools. The least I can do and I have set this as an aim to myself is to develop a good work environment here. If it is good to be here and if the people who come here receive maximum opportunities, then there are best chances for success. This has kept many men here.

This included paying special attention to male staff members and their concerns, for example by giving voice to men and amplifying their perspectives:

   Merle: [...] those men who are already here, should have their voices heard. Not in the sense that they should necessarily be promoted to a leadership position, but when teachers’ opinions are collected and other such things. So if a male educator is employed with only a 25% workload, his opinion is as important as that of his full time female colleague.

The idea and practice of paying higher salaries to male educators in order to recruit them to VET schools, was brought up and discussed, particularly by female heads of school. While they saw the low numbers of male teachers in VET more broadly and in their own schools more particularly as problematic, they nevertheless deemed this practice unethical and unfair:

   Merle: We cannot increase the prestige of VET study programmes by paying male educators more in order to keep them in schools. This is not a good way to solve the problem. Male and female teachers who come to work here with similar educational backgrounds and who have similar workloads, should receive an equal amount of pay.
At the same time, heads of school admitted to occasionally having recruited men from other sectors for temporary jobs and other initiatives in VET schools, for example in the framework of an externally funded project which enabled to pay them more than regular teacher salary.

Boys and men as learners in VET: the discourse of ‘the vulnerable male student’

In the context of the ‘feminised’ fields in VET that the teachers and heads of schools worked in, boys and men as learners were constructed as occupying a weaker position and having lesser chances in VET – particularly in ‘female-dominated’ fields such as arts, health and services – compared to women and girls. From this position, measures to mitigate the situation of boys and men as learners in VET were proposed. In the next sections, we unpack this discourse, taking a closer look at the elements that constituted it.

The ‘rare and special’ male student

All stakeholders emphasised that there is a serious lack of male students in vocational education, particularly in some study areas, reflecting the gender segregation of the labour market:

Riin, F, teacher: I’m seriously thinking that we should pay more attention to gender in our advertising. It is an eerie picture [in our admissions]: there were just girls.

This position was put forward particularly by teachers and heads of school in the ‘feminised’ areas of VET. The scarcity of male students was seen as a serious concern. Some stakeholders, however, noted the gradual increase of numbers of boys in some ‘feminised’ study areas, albeit a change that was seen as too slow.

Lesser numbers of boys among learners makes them stand out:

Merle: Let me be honest – when we had only like five male students here, we really wanted to keep them here and felt like we needed to make efforts to do that. Now that we have a hundred boys here, our attitudes have changed, also among teachers. Boys are no longer such a rarity, so now we can demand just as much from them as from girls. I remember when I was a teacher, about 5–6 years ago, there was a visibly talented boy in my class. He always spoke up in group discussions. But when the group had to submit their homework, the girls said that he had done nothing and they refused to put his name on the written assignment. I told him that he has to do the group assignment alone. He was upset and when he finally submitted it, I wasn’t happy with it and I asked him to resubmit. He lamented about not finishing school for this stupid subject, saying that thus far he had passed everything. I realised that this poor boy who had come to study with all those hundred girls, had just been pampered and supported by everyone.
However, it was not only or primarily the perceived low numbers of boys that made them seem vulnerable and special to the stakeholders, but qualitative aspects having to do with qualities attributed to male students in VET as well as the particularities of the VET environment, which we will discuss below.

**The ‘physically capable’ male student**

In discussing gender in the context of VET, the issue of the body came up in the interviews, particularly with the male heads of school. Male and female students’ physical capabilities were discussed in the context of VET and upon their entry to the labour market. Two male heads of school deemed certain areas of study and work as suitable only or particularly for men, due to physical demands:

> Meelis: Let me give you an example. Let’s imagine a warehouse with one female and one male employee. The lightest box in that warehouse is maybe fifty kilos. The man is capable of lifting it alone. But if you hire a woman for this work, to ensure gender equality, then she cannot cope with lifting boxes weighing fifty kilos all day. So this means, whether we want to admit it or not, that there are certain physiological characteristics, which do not enable to hire women for certain kinds of work. So if the box drops from the crane, the man deals with the mess, but the woman goes to get two men – who are busy doing other work – to help her lift the box. This is not how the economy should function and it is not an effective way to work.

This discourse, articulated by the male heads of school, constructing bodies as inescapably gendered, contrasting ‘strong men’ and ‘weak women’, was used to argue that gender equality efforts in VET are futile, or have only partial effect, due to limitations posed by the biological sex. Other stakeholders did not emphasise physical gender differences in such a way.

Even in areas of study and occupations which are traditionally ‘feminine’, such as healthcare and nursing, men were observed to end up in the more ‘masculine’ occupations or contexts within this field:

> Merle: Male nurses who graduate from our school are typically going to work as nurses in the ER or ambulance. […] They choose ambulance and the ER because there is more action there.

The idea that certain areas of VET and thereby certain occupations are suitable predominantly for men, due to their perceived superior physical characteristics, relies on an essentialised understanding of gender and helps to uphold gender segregation in VET.

**The ‘talented and creative’ but ‘bored’ male student**

The scarcity of male students in many areas of VET was associated with the content of VET, particularly in its ‘feminised’ fields, as ‘boring’ and unmotivational for them. This was seen as a broader problem of the education system,
which was seen as geared towards learning factual knowledge, considered more suitable to girls rather than to boys:

Tõnu: Our education system is designed to align with the strengths of girls in the study process rather than for boys. It is the same paradigm that we have been talking about for years, why boys drop out of the education system – it is because our education system is oriented towards learning facts. Girls are more diligent and learn better and are therefore more successful in the education system.

The need for a radical change was called for in approaches to teaching and learning, with an emphasis on skills. Acquiring practical skills was seen as a suitable activity for boys. At the same time, the stakeholders did not question whether the current teaching and learning model – seen as ‘girl-centered’ may in fact hinder the development of girls.

As another source of boredom in the learning environment of VET institutions, boys’ ‘superior’ and ‘more advanced’ technical skills were mentioned, compared to particularly older female educators, and too few opportunities for boys to engage in using technology:

Meelis: There is a big generational gap between the students and teachers. A young boy starting first grade knows a lot about all the technical gadgets and this teacher knows nothing. […] When this tech-savvy boy sees such a teacher in front of the classroom, he will never ever want to become a teacher.

Here, assumptions are made about (older female) teachers’ competence regarding the usage of technological devices as well as about boys’ interest in technology. It is the ‘fault’ of the ‘incompetent teachers’ who fail as appropriate role models, due to which boys do not develop an interest in becoming teachers themselves.

As an institutional factor impacting the success of male learners, the grading system in VET was regarded as disadvantageous to boys. It was seen to prefer diligence (associated with girls) over creativity (hidden) talents and independent thinking (associated with boys):

Liaa, F, teacher: I don’t believe that girls are better. It is just this grading system. They just do everything diligently, they never ask why they should do something and don’t protest. Boys think more rationally – when they don’t feel like studying because they think that these skills are not giving them anything, then they just drop out.

Overall, in this discourse, the problem was located in a system that does not consider male students’ needs. Solutions were seen in implementing changes on the institutional level.

The male dropout

The stakeholders raised the issue of male learners dropping out of VET. Reasons behind this were associated with their larger participation in paid
work and prioritisation of earning an income, which does not enable to focus on studies:

Riina: Boys who work often cannot get study leave. In our school, two thirds of our male students are pursuing their studies next to work. Boys are more likely to quit because work is more important to them. So this is where we struggle a bit. They have set their priorities well.

At the same time, it was admitted that schools do not collect gender-disaggregated statistics on reasons for quitting school.

The ‘outstanding’ male graduate
According to the stakeholders, male graduates are likely to be more successful in their ensuing career path and stand out more:

Piret, F, head of school: When I think of our graduates specifically, there are several examples of boys becoming stars and more well-known than girls.

The success of male graduates in the labour market was attributed to their stronger career-orientedness and need to stand out, compared to women. Also, it was admitted that employers in many fields prefer to employ men.

The discourse of the ‘outstanding’ male graduate, as part of the boarder discourse of the ‘vulnerable male student’, curiously does not disrupt the latter.

Special efforts to bring and retain boys in ‘feminised’ VET schools
Due to institutional factors seen as disadvantaging male learners and their perceived special needs, the stakeholders deemed it necessary to adopt what they considered gender-sensitive approaches to attract and keep them in VET schools.

This has involved recruitment activities that have included having male students represent and introduce the school in educational fairs and in similar events. As another measure, some schools have opened new study programmes with prospective male students in mind – so called ‘exciting curricula’, deemed appropriate for boys and their perceived interests. Also, existing curricula have been modified, to make the content ‘more suitable’ to boys:

Riina: [talking about the curricula of sales] Men and boys have gradually entered this study programme. This is a positive development. In the beginning, the curriculum was very much focused on the sales of food products. Now we have expanded it, to include construction products and other stuff. So now we will have more boys.

To mitigate the disadvantage that male students were perceived to experience, changes to the grading system – seen as giving an ‘unfair disadvantage’ to boys by not reflecting their ‘true capabilities’ – were proposed. It was thought that the grading system (including in entrance exams) should be made more ‘gender sensitive’, meaning that it would place more emphasis on reflecting each student’s personality and the content of the work, over its
form. Gender sensitive here, however, meant considering what were seen as the particularities of male students:

Mirjam, F, teacher: It doesn’t make sense to admit all these diligent girls and leave behind boys who have not opened up yet.

Here, boys are constructed as ‘late bloomers’, whose creativity is yet to blossom. It is this potential, seen in young men (and NOT in young women), that should be taken into account.

Especially female heads of school were concerned about disproportionate numbers of boys failing to pass the entrance exams. They had therefore redesigned (or planning to do so) the system of entrance exams, in order to give male learners an advantage:

Piret: About five or six years ago we changed our entrance exams, because we noticed that boys came to our exams but did not pass. We figured that something must be wrong with our system. We discussed this and as a result, we redesigned our exams, as we felt that our exams favour girls.

As evident from the quote above, the problem was located not with the boys, but with the entrance exams. One specific way in which the entrance exams were redesigned to give boys and men an advantage was to consider ‘specific characteristics’ of boys:

Piret: We have tried to value things that those young boys value, to consider how they express themselves at this age.

These practices were not, however, deemed entirely unproblematic. Some teachers expressed concern over possibly disadvantaging girls with the implementation of these new criteria, admitting that diligence and dutifulness attributed to girls may be in fact valuable qualities. Some heads of school admitted that legally however, it is not permissible to favour boys:

Riina: Well, in the first round of the entrance exams we have an interview them... I have to admit that we do favour boys a little, but not openly and this is not recorded, it is like an unwritten rule.

The following narrative of modifying entrance exams to favour boys, encapsulates well the attitudes that stakeholders have towards boys and men as learners in VET – their lower educational attainment is compensated by their perceived creativity and ability to stand out. Both characteristics are favoured to the diligence attributed to girls:

Meelis: Let me bring you an example. It was about ten years ago when we admitted students to our IT programme based on their average grade. The competition was fierce – the weakest student admitted had an average grade of 4,4 [out of 5]. I remember that only girls got in, no boys or maybe just one boy I think. They all attended perfectly, did all their assignments, there was no problem. Each day after classes finished, they went home. They graduated with perfect grades and I think one
got a job in IT. Then we took a closer look at this, to see what was going on – it was a perfect group of students, great people. But the following year [after graduation], all of them were at home with children. Then we thought we are not going do this any more, so we just admitted students by interviewing them. Well, then all these quirky IT guys showed up. They didn’t make it to classes, some of them had average grades lower than three. But they were exuberant in everything they were doing, with their own hands, all these new IT systems and all. It didn’t matter what time it was, they were willing to put in effort. All this bunch was willing to work from morning to evening for the school, because it was a challenge for them – can they make it or not. They sat at the computer all the time. They all graduated and got jobs. So now let me pose you a question: what kind of people should the VET system train - these beautiful girls who did not actually go to work after graduating, and did not want to work after class time, and did not want to do anything beyond what was compulsory [...]? I am deeply convinced that our purpose is to train those others, to support their natural curiosity and their development. This is our task.

With this narrative, the director suggests that the task of the VET system is to support the development of boys, as they are seen as more successful in the labour market upon graduation, with no ‘competing’ responsibilities, such as domestic care work. The latter part of the quote aligns with the discourse of the ‘outstanding’ male graduate, presented in the previous section. Such portrayal of female students in a ‘masculine’ field serves to strengthen the discourse of ‘talented’ and ‘special’ boys in VET.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we studied the construction of men and masculinities in VET from a critical perspective. We aimed to understand how key stakeholders in the Estonian VET system see men as learners and educators in this context. Drawing on interviews with VET experts, heads of VET schools and teachers (the latter working in ‘feminised’ areas of VET), we identified two related discourses, which we labelled as ‘the exceptional male teacher’ and ‘the vulnerable male student’. We outlined key elements that made up these discourses. These discourses draw on and support the broader discourse of ‘feminisation of education’ and the related discourse of the ‘boy crisis’ in education prevalent in many Western societies. The VET stakeholders constructed the scarcity of men particularly in some areas of VET as a matter of concern and as an indication of men’s vulnerability in this context. Men as teachers and learners were seen as exceptional and deserving special treatment, at least in the ‘feminised’ areas of VET (arts, health and services). Yet, we suggest that at least to some degree, the exceptional and vulnerable male figure in VET may also feature in more ‘masculine’ fields of VET where men outnumber women. This is because of their status and role as teachers – a feminised and thus an undervalued occupation in Estonia, in terms of the gender ratio of teachers as
well as symbolically. As teachers, men in VET are generally not able to pursue successful careers or earn large incomes (at least compared to work in other areas, such as the private sector). Given this situation and stemming from the still prevalent idea of men as main breadwinners in the Estonian society, VET schools may give male teachers special treatment (for example, in the form of higher salaries), to try to prevent them from abandoning VET (entirely) for more lucrative careers elsewhere.

Concern over the wellbeing of men and boys in VET aligns with findings of other studies carried out in Estonia on gender in general education (Kütt and Papp 2012) and higher education (Aavik 2017). By voicing these observations on ways in which men as teachers and learners differ from women in VET and displaying concern over their wellbeing, the stakeholders considered themselves to be exhibiting gender-sensitivity. However, this purported gender-sensitivity in fact constituted emphasising differences between men and women and ultimately results in reproducing gender stereotypes, including encouraging traditional ways of performing masculinity. These attitudes demonstrate stakeholders’ low awareness on gender and gender equality. These views stem from as well as help to (re)produce a broader context where gender equality and diversity are not regarded as legitimate aims in Estonian VET, unlike in many Western contexts, where they are recognised as important aims and values to be pursued in the teaching and learning process.

Our findings reflect the tendency of educational stakeholders to see gender in essentialist terms and attribute certain different qualities to men and women in VET, failing to see diversity within these broad gender groups. This stems from and reinforces the idea of gender as a binary, with complementary ‘female’ and ‘male’ qualities which balance each other out, which often figures in popular imagination. Thereby, VET stakeholders produce VET as a site which encourages the (re)emergence of gender difference and heteronormativity.

The discourses of male exceptionality and disadvantage in VET do particular work which has material consequences – they legitimise and lead to some forms of social action while ruling out and rendering unthinkable others (Phillips and Jorgensen 2002, 6). They have important implications not only for men and masculinities in VET but for gendered power relations and possibilities to advance gender equality in VET more broadly.

For one, treating men as exceptional and deserving special attention in VET helps to reproduce male privilege and leave unchallenged certain traditional ways of doing masculinity. For example, perceiving male teachers as providing a superior educational experience for students and attributing the role of a breadwinner to them, gives men an advantage compared to their female colleagues, as some schools are willing to make extra efforts to bring in and retain men. This may manifest in paying them higher salaries and in special efforts to make them feel good at VET institutions. This in turn helps to
reinforce men’s sense of entitlement. The special efforts to bring and keep men in VET institutions link to the question of gender equality initiatives and particularly quotas. Gender-sensitive approaches and especially quotas to boost women’s representation have remained very unpopular in Estonia, including in the education system (see Aavik 2017) and have not been officially implemented in high levels of decision-making in Estonia. It is therefore striking that these measures are deemed in this case – at least in ‘feminised’ areas of VET – not only acceptable but also desirable where men and boys are concerned.

The discourse of men as vulnerable and deserving special treatment in VET is curiously divorced from the consideration of the privileged position of men in most key areas of social life in Estonia, where they remain an advantaged group, for example, in terms of income and representation in political and business decision making. This is despite the fact that women in Estonia are on average more highly educated than men.5

Another obvious implication and consequence of these ways of conceptualising men and masculinities in VET is that male teachers and learners remain more visible and more highly valued than women in VET, whose presence and well-being in VET is taken for granted in some key areas of VET. Notably, some problems in VET raised by the stakeholders – such as low salaries and not sufficiently engaging content in some study programmes – were raised only in connection with men in VET, and not seen as a source of concern in relation to women as students and educators in VET. As such, the particularities and concerns of women as teachers and students in VET can be easily side-lined, as they are not rendered exceptional. More broadly, the current state of affairs where VET and other types of education largely rely on the underpaid and undervalued labour of a predominantly female work force remains unchallenged.

Our findings point to the persistence of conservative ideas about men’s roles in VET in Estonia and reflect as well as reproduce broader stereotypical expectations to men in the Estonian society. This suggests a need for VET systems in Estonia and elsewhere which do not specifically consider men as gendered actors to adopt explicitly gender-sensitive and critical approaches, to counter constructions of men and masculinities that reproduce gender stereotypes and non-egalitarian gender relations.

Notes

1. See for example Haasler and Gottschall (2015).
2. For example, Estonia has the largest gender pay gap in the EU – 25.3% (Eurostat 2016).
3. For an overview of the development of the Estonian VET system in the post-Soviet context, see Õmarik and Goodson (2018).
4. The project, known by the acronym SIHT, was carried out in 2014–2015 jointly by the Estonian Women’s Associations Roundtable and the Estonian Women’s Studies and Resource Centre. The project aimed to integrate the gender perspective into teacher training and further education and to raise gender awareness of educational professionals. The project was funded by Norwegian Grants 2009–2014 programme Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Promoting Work-Life Balance.

5. In 2016, women made up 64% of all university graduates (Statistics Estonia 2017).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Estonian Research Council [IUT18-2].

**References**


