

MEDIA RELEASE



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News editors: Dr Lynch is available for pre-interviews. Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.

At last! The answer – why girls shun IT at secondary school

A national research project has identified why, despite 20 years of research and numerous waves of intervention, the number of girls taking IT at secondary school is still significantly lower than that of boys.

Despite enjoying and using computers for email and instant messaging, many girls shun IT at school because they find it uninteresting, unrelated to the IT skills they develop outside of school, and irrelevant to their career aspirations.

Many girls and boys still believe that females are not suited to high level technical work in IT, the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study found.

Researchers from the University of Western Sydney, Deakin University and Charles Sturt University looked at what students in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria thought of secondary school IT subjects and the reasons they chose to study or not study IT in the senior years of secondary school.

Dr Julianne Lynch from Deakin University, said even those students with an interest in technology find the content of school IT subjects boring and irrelevant to their lives and aspirations. "For many students their experiences of using computers in the earlier years of secondary school to perform basic and repetitive tasks puts them off pursuing IT studies in years 11 and 12 and beyond," she said.

Dr Lynch said enrolments in senior IT subjects have fallen dramatically in recent years. The participation of girls has fallen at an even greater rate than that of boys. Many of the factors that have led to the decrease seem to have a greater effect on girls, whose interest in this subject area has traditionally been very fragile.

Dr Lynch said students failed to see the connection between what they were learning at school in the IT classroom and their use of technology outside school.

"This is particularly the case for girls, who might have high level skills in using popular communication and leisure technologies, but often see themselves as being 'no good' at school IT," she said.

Dr Lynch said the proportion of girls participating in year 12 certificate-level IT subjects in 2006 was approximately 30% in NSW, SA and Victoria. Girls made up only 8% of enrolments for what are considered to be the most demanding and most technical IT subjects, eg. those focusing on software design and development.

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Yet, in South Australia girls made up 51% of enrolments for a popular IT subject which focussed on skill development and software applications rather than the theoretical foundations of computers science and information systems.

The study found that gender stereotypes still dominated students' talk about IT.

“For this day and age, the students have seemingly outdated beliefs about what is an appropriate career for men and women and very narrow ideas about IT,” Dr Lynch said.

“For boys, an interest and success in IT studies is still seen as ‘nerdy’ and is associated with being socially inept while for girls, high levels of skill and interest in IT is still not considered appropriate nor seen as a suitable pathway to study or work.”

Dr Lynch said students had a limited understanding about the pathways into IT careers and what to expect in those careers. Students also incorrectly thought there were no jobs in the IT industry.

“There really is a need for accurate and current information to be provided to students and parents about the employment and career opportunities for university IT graduates,” she said.

Curriculum designers also need to take students' existing technical expertise and their use of technology outside of school into account when designing learning activities.

The **Gender and IT** research project, funded under the Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project scheme, was conducted through the collaboration of researchers at the University of Western Sydney, Deakin University and Charles Sturt University.

The findings of the project have been published in a book titled: *‘Gender and I.T: Ongoing challenges for computing and Information Technology education in Australian secondary schools,’* to be officially launched by the Hon. Daryl Melham at Gleebooks, Sydney, 6pm Monday 5th May, 2008. Copies of the text can be purchased from <http://www.acsa.edu.au>.

Media contact: Dr Julianne Lynch and Dr Leonie Rowan are available for interview. Please contact Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.