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European Commission

Opening speech

Conference "Gender Differences in Educational Achievement"

Uppsala – 17 November 2009

Education and Culture DG

(Check against delivery)

Introduction - The social dimension of equity and the crucial role of education

Minister, ladies and gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here for this conference on gender and educational achievement and bring apologies from our Director-General, Odile Quintin, who unfortunately has been prevented by illness from joining us as planned to open the event. The Commission is grateful to the Swedish Presidency for organising a conference on this vital topic.

We are living in an era of profound change. The economic and financial crisis has rocked many assumptions about progress, and sent us searching for a new paradigm on which to build our future. We need the answers that will help us build an inclusive, innovative knowledge society, to meet the global challenges we face.

In this new paradigm, education is key. First, in surmounting the crisis: so that people hold on to and improve their skills; so that our young people have the right skills for the world ahead.

But over the longer term too, equitable, outward-looking education and training will be crucial in shaping our societies and our economies. Because it is people's skills, and their capacity to create and innovate, that will be the real building-blocks of the future.

At such a time, it is more important than ever to tackle the issues of gender and gender differences in education and achievement. If we are to share a future where every individual's potential is to be valued and used to the full, we cannot allow any one sector of society to be held back and we must face up to the facts of how education impacts differentially on boys and girls.

Ensuring that our schools and universities treat every child and student equitably is a valuable goal in itself, and a fundamental principle for the European Union. But it is more than that. Equity is the foundation for personal development and social inclusion – it is an essential ingredient of a fully functioning democratic society.

It makes economic sense too. If education and training are not equitable, we risk huge hidden costs. Both corrective costs: in health, social services, and the justice system. And foregone costs: in lower productivity, innovation and economic activity. The knowledge society to which we aspire must be built on the contribution of all and not just of a few categorised as “excellent”.

Building a knowledge society

We already see the first seeds of this knowledge society - the world is changing, and the world of work with it. There will be a huge demand for higher level skills across the board, and for the learning-to-learn skills that enable people to keep up with change. We must ensure that education and training are equipped to help our young women and men, not just to face change, but to shape it.

This is why the double goal of European policy on education is to **build both upwards** – ensuring excellence in education – **and outwards** – opening up education so that everyone acquires the higher skills that the jobs of the future will require.

Increasing efficiency and reducing inequality are not mutually exclusive. But equality does not happen by accident. We must ensure that a willingness to change is backed up by change in teacher education and school practices.

Equality and gender equality in education: a complex issue

Equality between women and men is a cornerstone of the European Union. By establishing the principle of equal pay for equal work, the Treaty of Rome ushered in wide-ranging change across Europe that went far beyond the economic sphere. The Amsterdam Treaty took an even bigger step forward, establishing a fundamental principle outlawing discrimination on a whole range of grounds, including gender.

After five decades of striving for equality, there are important achievements of which we can all rightly be proud: more and more women are highly qualified; more women are in the labour market, and in all types of work, including those previously dominated by men; and women's voice in business and economic and political decision-making keeps growing.

Women are doing better in education, surpassing men in public examinations in many countries. 55% of university students and 60% of graduates are women. Female students are also more mobile, accounting for 60% of Erasmus students.

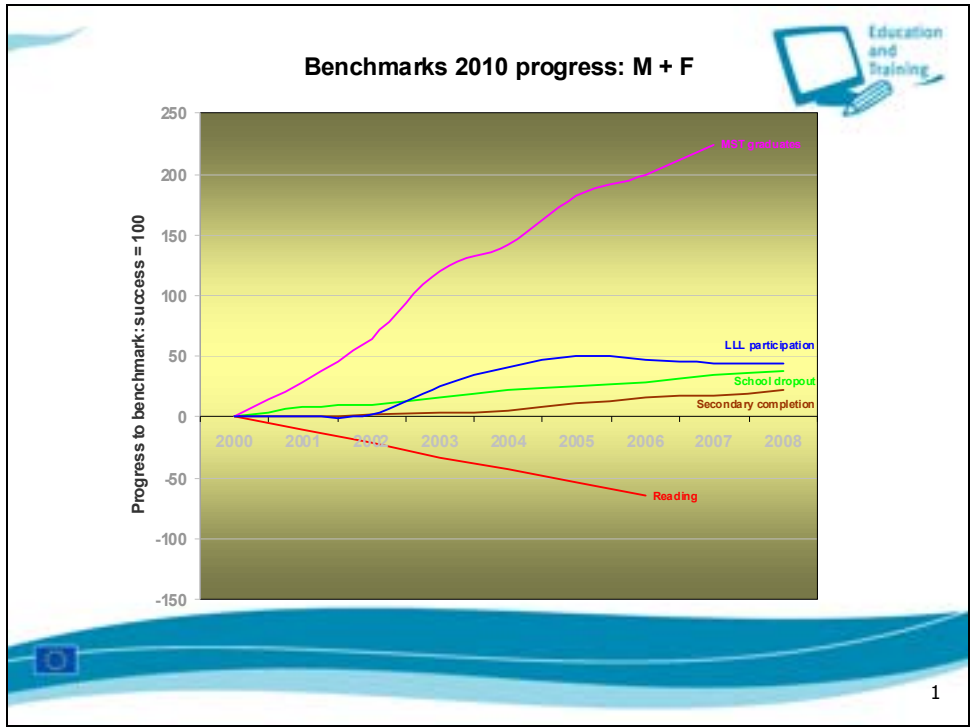
But gender differences and inequalities persist: in subject preferences and performance, in qualitative aspects of the education and training experience.

And important gender gaps to the detriment of men and boys exist – they have the highest rates of early school leaving and literacy failure. These gender gaps vary across the 27 Member States, and the averages conceal a range of extremes.

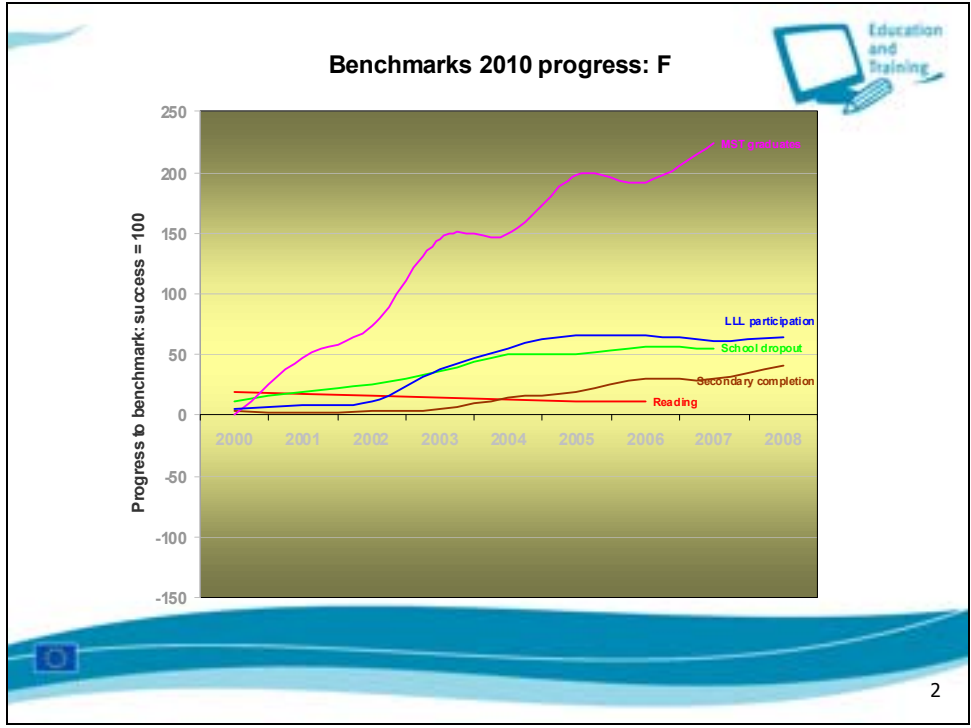
Benchmarks and performance

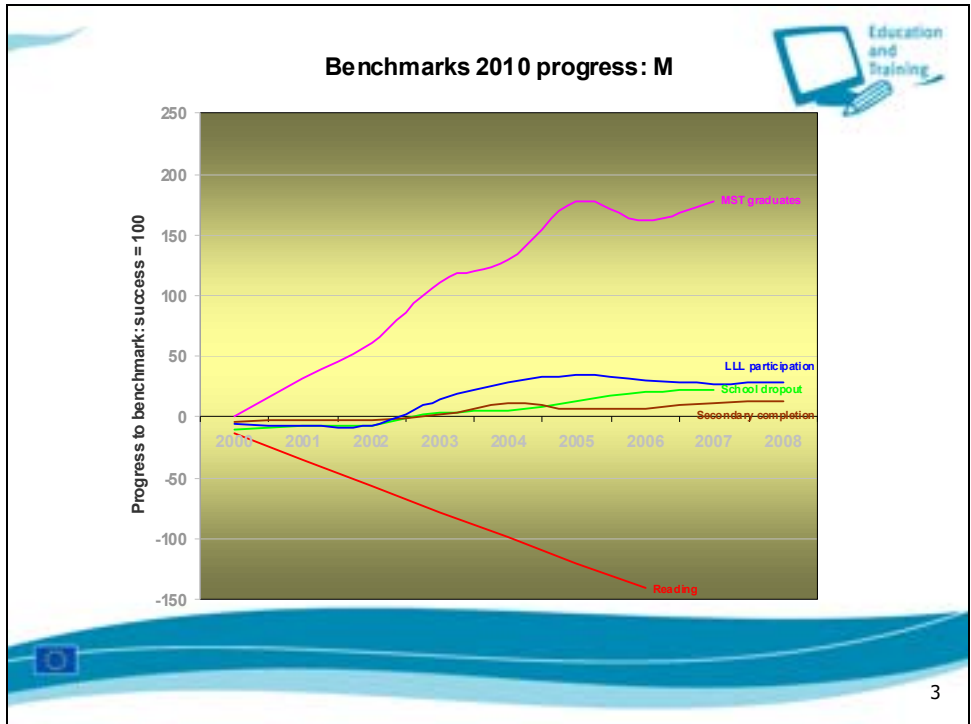
In 2002, Member States set some key education benchmarks to be reached by 2010. Let us have a quick look at how we've done.

The first slide shows overall progress against these benchmarks. On supply of maths and science graduates, adult participation in lifelong learning, reducing early school leaving, improving upper secondary school completion rates, and reducing the number of low-achievers in reading literacy. The starting point is the level of achievement in the year 2000, and, on the left-hand axis, 100 is the level needed to reach the benchmark by 2010. An upwards line shows positive progress. The only benchmark that has been (and will be) achieved is on the growth in the number of maths, science and technology graduates (but within that, the gender component will not be achieved, as we shall see). On literacy, performance is actually getting worse.

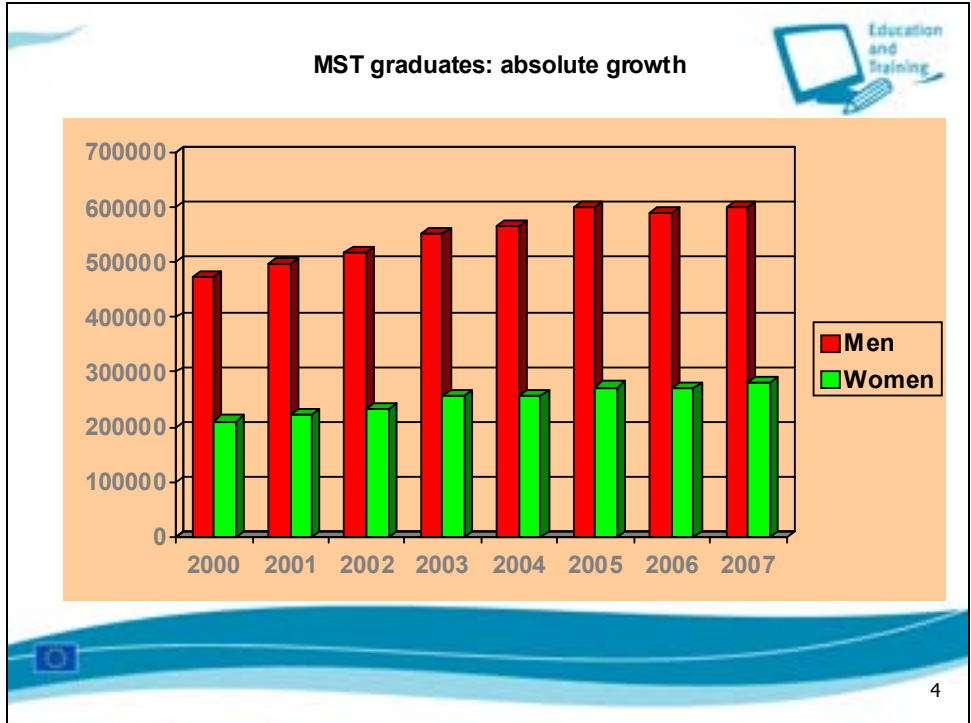


Now let's see how performance compares against these same benchmarks when broken down by gender:





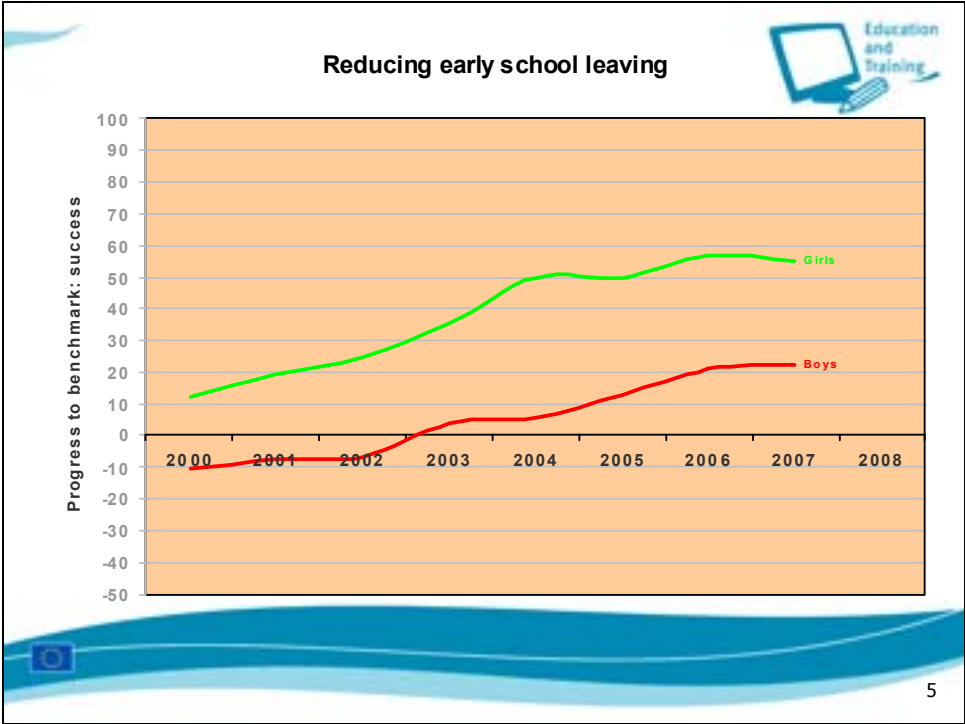
On no single benchmark are boys/men progressing better than girls/women. When we compare them in detail, we can see different trends:

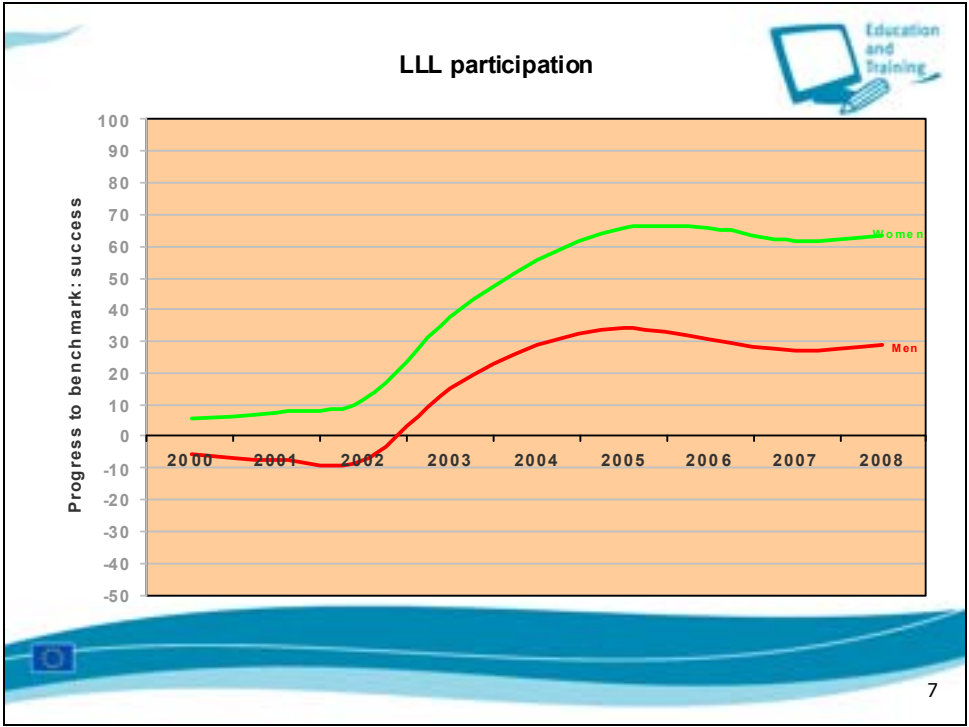
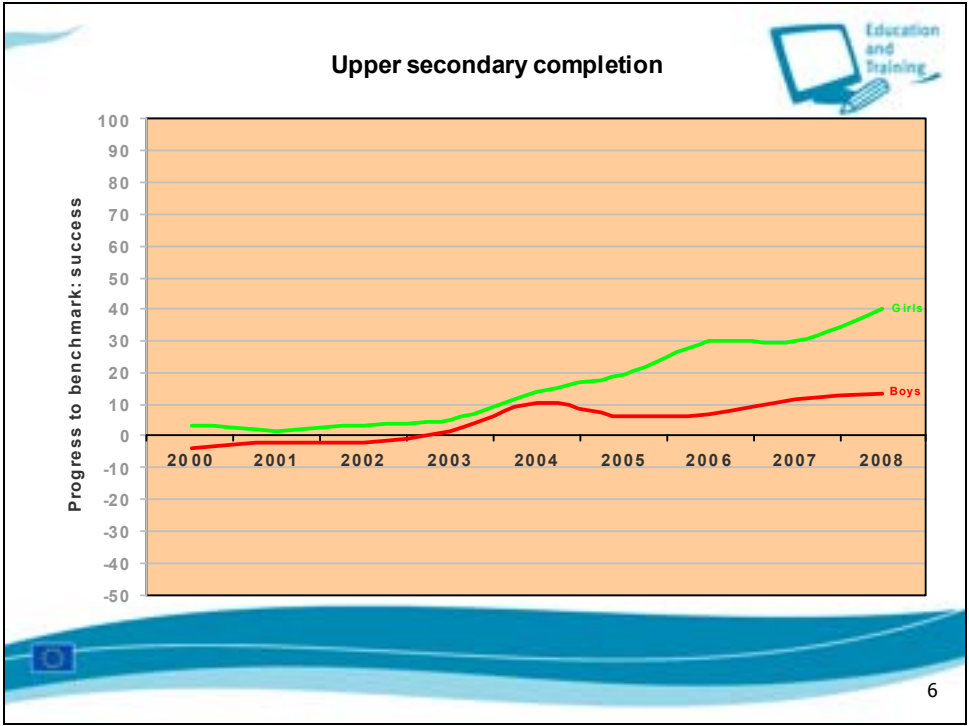


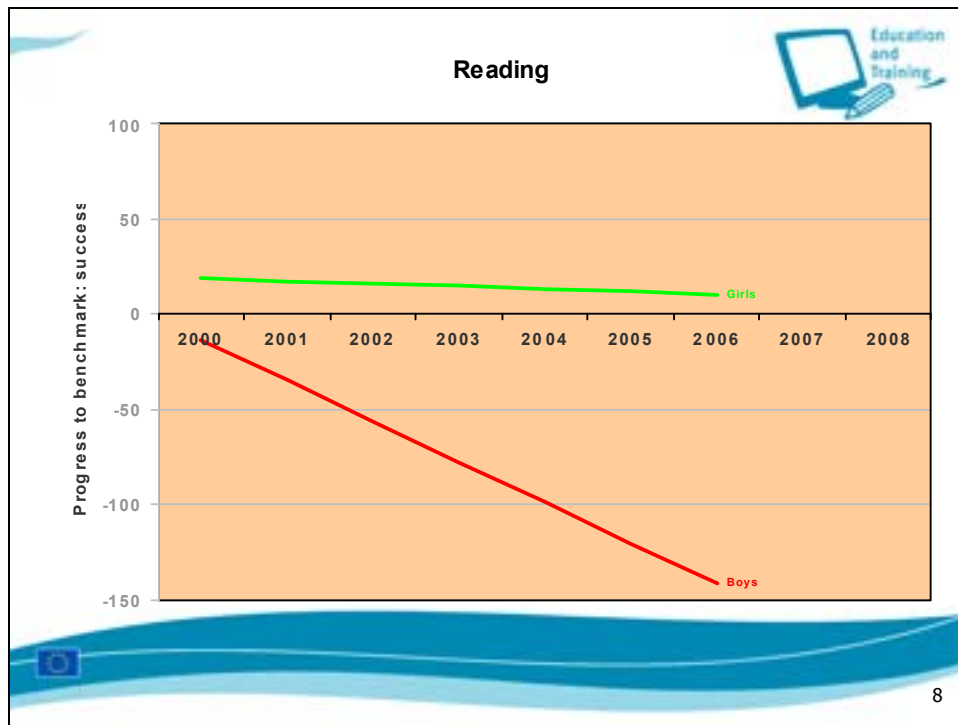
As I said, the element of the benchmark on maths, science and technology graduation that will not be met is to achieve a better balance between men and

women. There has been progress since 2000, but at this rate it will take 130 years for women to achieve parity with men!

Turning to the other benchmarks, in every case girls have been improving faster than boys, and the gap between them is bigger now than it was in 2000 – in the case of reading literacy the picture is the most alarming, with boys accounting for almost all of the decline:







(It should be remembered, though, that the literacy measure is based on just two PISA data-points, which are not fully comparable. The PISA results to be published in 2010 will focus on literacy again, and we will know if this very worrying trend is confirmed.)

Improving opportunities for girls while coping with the underperformance of boys?

As these results show, the issue of gender in education and training is extremely complex.

Even if boys perform less well in reading, are more often assessed as having special educational needs, and are present in far lower numbers in care-related studies; and even if girls are disadvantaged in certain areas of education and training (despite having reached excellence in most), the conclusion that we just need to concentrate on underachievement among boys and on more opportunities for girls is too simplistic.

We have to recognise that inequality in education is a complex, cross-cutting issue. It can only be tackled in the context of a comprehensive strategy for inclusive education: by analysing how social origin, poverty, ethnicity, age and gender interact with one another.

Women and men are not homogenous groups. Rather than falling back on stereotyped attitudes and expectations, we need a coordinated multi-faceted approach to tackling gender differences in schools, one that addresses curriculum issues, peer pressures and cultural attitudes and expectations.

The EU is encouraging and supporting Member States to design policies in education that recognise this complexity. And to promote a range of responses, involving family and school support, alternative schooling, and financial incentives.

I am sure that this conference will contribute much to future work at EU level on these important issues, and look forward to the next two days of discussion and debate.
