



**Lifelong Learning:
Work related education and training
Meeting the needs of Australian women**

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Lifelong learning: work related education and training. Meeting the needs of Australian women.

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For more information please go to:
S4W Website: <http://www.security4women.com>
WAVE Website: <Http://www.wave.com.au>

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Introduction

In 2003, Security 4 Women (S4W) undertook research to gain a representative view of women's priorities regarding lifelong economic wellbeing. 3000 women were surveyed Australia wide. The women, regardless of age, economic background and socioeconomic status, identified five high priority areas: work arrangements to help balance family and other responsibilities; affordable education and training for all ages; equal representation in management and leadership; equality of male and female wages and salaries; and education about financial and economic issues (Doughney J, McDonald F, Pyke J, Lyon A, Leahy M & Rea J/S4W 2004)

In 2004/2005 S4W after consideration of available research activities, and in collaboration with WAVE, invested in a major research project with the focus on lifelong learning, with a specific focus on work-related education and training, for women and girls. This project consisted of five small-scale (vignette) research projects to investigate identified priority areas (see Appendix One). The research was funded through the Australian Government's Office for Women (OfW) and enabled S4W to propose policy direction and strategic suggestions to better facilitate economic security for women. The research agenda was set within the broad global/local context of lifelong learning and OECD global policy priorities.

Australian Policy Context

The major national policy document written specifically for women and girls in vocational education and training (VET) is "*Women: Shaping our future*" (ANTA 2004). This document "...was considered by Australian, State and Territory Ministers for vocational education and training in July 2003. Ministers agreed to women in VET issues being addressed in an integrated way through annual VET planning and reporting processes" ANTA 2004: Preface). As discussed during extensive consultations for this document, and the awareness of the significance of congruence with the then National Policy Document for VET (*Shaping our future: Australia's National Strategy for vocational education and training (VET) 2004 - 2010*) it was considered strategically prudent that the 'women's' policy document be constructed around the four objectives of the 'mainstream' policy document. . This, it was decided, should place women and girls 'in a very strong position to progress the learning and employment outcomes of women engaged in VET' and "... provide leverage and accountability for progressing women's issues via mainstream VET policy and planning processes and to provide a framework for reporting on women in VET issues.. (ANTA 2004, Preface; p. 2)

In particular, it was further considered that each and all of the 12 strategies that accompanied the four major objectives were highly relevant to women, and, if achieved, would have "a positive impact on access to and participation in VET and pathways to improved employment outcomes" (ANTA 2004 p 2).

These strategies included:

1. Increase participation and achievement, particularly by existing workers
2. Help clients navigate and interact with vocational education and training
3. Improve the value, brand, language and image of vocational education and training and public recognition of its employment outcomes
4. Take positive steps to achieve equality of participation and achievement
5. Make a sustained investment in TAFE and other Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)

6. Enable training providers and brokers to partner with industry to drive innovation
7. Implement flexible funding models and planning and accountability approaches
8. Develop a sustainable mix of funding
9. Strengthen industry's role in anticipating skill requirements and developing products and services to meet them
10. Make learning pathways seamless
11. Improve quality and consistency
12. Facilitate access to international markets. (ANTA 2004 p2-3)

The implementation of this policy and all it promised has been disappointing, on a national level. 'Women' as a group, have all but disappeared, cloaked by broad-based statistics that fail to illuminate the picture that lies beneath such aggregates, For this reason, this research is both timely and significant. It is also interesting to note the continuing similarities of many of the findings with those evident during the compilation of the 2004 Policy document.

Key Performance Indicators

In April 2007, WAVE received correspondence from Hon. Andrew Robb, Federal Minister for Vocational and Further Education reaffirming the implementation and perceived success of the policy framework *Women: Shaping our Future*, citing an approach to women in VET that was named as 'integration with visibility'. However, although women are partaking increasingly in VET, this goal of 'integration with visibility' is not being met as women's outcomes from VET are still not equal nor adequate. WAVE believes that one method of ensuring the successful application of this policy is the integration and implementation of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), to assist in the delivery, measurement and evaluation of women's position in VET. Given the need for this, the following key performance indicators are proffered for inclusion into national/state and territory delivery systems for VET

1. The level of women's participation and achievement in vocational education and training.

The number of Australian women who do vocational education and training each year and the number of qualifications, competencies and modules they attain (including through recognition processes).

2. The level of women's employment outcomes and benefits after training and their satisfaction with their training program.

The proportion of Australian vocational education and training women students who improve their employment circumstances or continue on to further study, after completing training, or who perceive they have gained benefits from completing their training.

The proportion of Australian vocational education and training women students who are satisfied with their vocational education and training program.

3. The level of employer adoption of, and satisfaction with, vocational education and training in meeting the skill needs of their workforce.

The proportion of Australian employers who are aware of, and who have adopted vocational education and training to meet the skill needs of their female workforce.

The proportion of Australian employers who are satisfied with vocational education and training in meeting the skill needs of their female workforce.

4. **The extent to which Indigenous Australian women engage with and achieve positive outcomes from vocational education and training.**

The number of Indigenous Australian women who do vocational education and training each year and the number of qualifications, competencies and modules they attain.

The proportion of Indigenous vocational education and training women students who improve their employment circumstances or continue on to further study, after completing training, or who perceive that they have gained benefits from completing their training.

The proportion of the vocational education and training workforce who identify as Indigenous women.

The Research

The purpose of the overarching research project, *Lifelong Learning: work related education and training for women*, was to identify priority areas and accommodate diverse perspectives and needs of women rather than generalize for all women. It is useful to consider the profile of those well served by the VET system, who are not homogenous, experience good levels of participation, progress easily through their qualification, and go on to achieve good employment outcomes. This group is also identified as having successfully completed high school, aged 25-45, in secure employment and living in secure housing in a metropolitan area. The profile of those not well served is partially defined by what it does not include - not female, no disability, not from a non-English speaking background, not Indigenous and never having been incarcerated or institutionalized. The benefit of identifying this profile is to highlight that it is in the best interests of the majority of the population to expand the profile of who is well served by the VET system. In order to do so, effective measures need to be in place to monitor changes.

Discrete research sub-projects were conducted through WAVE for S4W in order to provide 'snapshots' of different groups of women within the area of work related learning and VET, and who have not been well served by the VET system: girls and young women; Indigenous women in remote communities; women in small and micro business; women from low socioeconomic backgrounds and women returning to the workforce and retraining. Key issues and common themes have been identified and policy recommendations have been made based on the evidence gathered, underpinned by the extensive, well-documented body of research that precedes S4W's work.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used as a basis throughout the project and were also used in this report to provide a platform for discussion.

- How do women talk about their own aspirations for paid work?
- How do women see education and training contributing to these needs/aims?
- What are women's experiences with education and training?
- What policy directions and programs would best support women in the interlinking areas of employment, education and training?

Reports from *Lifelong Learning: work related education and training for women* project.

The following reports are heavily drawn upon to inform this report.

Young women and girls

Butler, Elaine and Woolley, Robyn (2005) *Getting Real? Young Women and Girls, Working Futures, VET, and VET in Schools*. Security4Women.

http://www.security4women.com/Getting_Real_Executive_Summary.pdf and <http://www.wave.org.au>

Indigenous women

Lawrence Kate (Waltja Tjutanku Palyapayi Aboriginal Corporation (Waltja)/WAVE) (2005) *Helping People to Help Themselves: a study of training issues for Aboriginal women and their remote communities in Central Australia*. Security4Women.

http://www.security4women.com/HelpingPeopleToHelpThemselves_Waltjareport_July05.pdf and <http://www.wave.org.au>

Women from low socioeconomic backgrounds

Turner-Zeller, Kimberley (WAVE) (Feb 2006) *The Way Forward: The importance of VET to Australian women in poverty*. Security4Women¹.

http://www.security4women.com/The_Way_Forward_Publication.pdf and <http://www.wave.org.au>

Women in Micro and Small Business

Turner-Zeller Kimberley and Butler Elaine (Eds.) (April 2007) *Making it Work: a study of education and training issues for women in micro and small business* Security4Women².

<http://www.security4women.com> and <http://www.wave.org.au>

Women Retraining and Returning to Work

Turner-Zeller Kimberley and Butler Elaine (Eds.) (2007) *Lifelong Learning and Work Related Education and Training for Women Returning to Work and Retraining*. Security4Women³.

<http://www.security4women.com> and <http://www.wave.org.au>

Key Messages

Each of the reports illustrates the positive attitude and high regard of the women and girls, who contributed to projects as research participants, to lifelong learning, and, in this case, to vocational education and training.

¹ Research conducted for WAVE in association with The Smith Family

² Research conducted for WAVE by JobTactics, Perth W.A.

³ Research conducted for WAVE by JobTactics, Perth WA

The key messages for each of the five reports include:

Girls and young women

The rapid growth in popularity of implementation and access to VET in schools, without adequate planning, has created an educational environment that is gender blind and is reinforcing old patterns of feminized course choices that are traditionally low paid and requiring little skill, potentially hampering career choice and economic security for girls and young women. Girls have high expectations and enjoyment from their VET courses. Little research, planning and monitoring of girls' outcomes from VET in schools programs has been done to date and must be implemented. Career advice for girls and young women engaging in VET pathways to employment is patchy and far from adequate in relation to labour market realities and so sustainable outcomes for this cohort.

Indigenous women

Indigenous women highly value education and training that is practical and relevant to themselves and their communities. Very little access to information regarding availability and types of courses, as well as hampered efforts at access because of remoteness and family/community commitments have left Aboriginal women out of a system that could potentially supply the tools for greater economic and social security of remote communities. The cost, timing, lack of recognition of prior learning and lack of work placements also prevent Aboriginal women from participating in or participating well in VET programs.

Women from low socioeconomic backgrounds

Women living in poverty have less access to VET, and less adequate outcomes from VET, due to a lack of targeted information, family commitments, insecure financial and work environments, and lack of support from VET providers, the government and the community. These women see education and training not only as a means to better employment, but as a way of increasing confidence and personal skills, yet they are not being provided with tools to make their lives more secure.

Women in micro and small business

Women in small and micro businesses do not access VET at a high rate for themselves, and even less for training their staff. Cost, timing, lack of recognition of prior learning and currency of courses, as well as family commitments and a lack of knowledge regarding VET, keep their participation low, although they do wish to further their studies and see VET as a future option for this.

Women returning to work and retraining

Women returning to work and retraining who are participating in VET see it as a means to enhanced paid work outcomes, however, this is often not the case. Lack of information regarding types of course availability and a lack of knowledge that VET may be suitable for their needs, keeps many women wishing to return to work out of the VET system, as do cost, timing, recognition of prior learning and family commitments.

Aim of this Report

The aim of this report is to collate and synthesize the findings of the five research projects, under the S4W/WAVE umbrella project *Lifelong Learning: work related education and training for women*, and provide recommendations that enable action, reporting and follow up to better provide for women in vocational education and training.

Approach

The findings from all five of the above reports were carefully analyzed and collated, and key themes were extracted to create a synthesis. A report based on each of the four research questions was then created and what follows is a discussion of these. Recommendations are then presented and concluding remarks given.

Key Messages

- Women and young girls are not visible in the VET system and the interlinking area of employment, thus they are not being catered for on an equitable level. Enhancing the visibility of women and girls under a specific women-centred policy framework that is flexible and so has the capacity to cater for the diversity of needs that exist within category 'women' is required as a matter of urgency.
- There is a serious lack of appropriate information provided to women in all stages of their interactions with VET providers and career decision making. Information is difficult to find, made more so by the environment and life stages of women and the information that is accessed most often recommends traditional career, education and work areas that are highly feminized, poorly paid and require low skills. Information given is not based on predicted trends in the labour market, employment trends and areas of potential skills shortages and the economy. Those living in remote areas or those with literacy or health issues, women of low socioeconomic status and older women are most at risk of not accessing appropriate information.
- Women are more likely to be underemployed and in casual work, because of this lack of information, and thus poor subject and career choices. Career and education pathways are generally chosen based on personal interest and likes.
- Women in general regard education and training highly and see it as a means to improved career and paid work outcomes, a way of increasing skills, building their confidence and interpersonal skills. Expectations for work outcomes are rarely met.
- The cost of education, the scheduling and length of courses, and currency of course material, prevent women from entering VET.
- Lack of recognition of prior learning to women in small business, women retraining or returning to work and those with extensive practical experience, prolongs unproductive education and drains limited resources.
- Support services such as widely available finance and affordable, good quality child care would make women's transition into education, training and employment more accessible.
- Work placements and on-the-job training are highly sort after by women engaging in VET.
- A national system of data collection and disaggregation about women and girls, VET and their move to employment (including employment outcomes) is not available, and as such reliability of data fueling current policy direction and evaluation is questionable.

1. How do women talk about their aspirations for paid work?

1.1 Employment

Nearly all women surveyed by WAVE have aspirations for paid work and were in various stages of obtaining these; some were unemployed, and of these, some were gaining education and/or training to become employed, and others were already employed and had aspirations for advancement or changing jobs. Access to paid employment is limited for each of the respondent groups. Employment that is accessed often produces low pay and is generally low skilled and feminised. Job and careers paths are chosen mainly based on personal interest rather than financial gain. Employment does not ensure a path out of poverty.

1.1 1 Unemployment and Underemployment

A lack of employment options decreases a woman's chance of gainful employment, for example, Aboriginal communities have a lack of senior or managerial positions available to them, and qualification levels are a barrier to most other jobs. Aboriginal women seek new job opportunities for their young people in their own towns or locations for the benefit of their own communities. Thus, although they have aspirations for employment, preferably paid, aspirations for self governance and welfare improvements are the main goal, to be achieved through education and employment. Access to employment for women of low socioeconomic status is partly limited by education choices, such as administration and service industry courses, as well as family and child care commitments, thus low level jobs are most accessed because they require lower education levels and are more flexible with hours and casuality. Unemployment rates are very high for this group, and even higher for rural, isolated, or migrants and refugee women. Lone mothers are also at high risk of unemployment. Family history is an important aspect of this group's aspiration for paid work, especially for early school leavers. Women of low socioeconomic status generally follow their parent's experiences in terms of education and employment outcomes, steps which may have helped lead to their current poverty situation. Poverty is cyclical in nature, thus breaking the bonds and habits of poverty causing behavior is an additional barrier to achieving aspirations for these women.

Women in small business are either 'pushed' or 'pulled' into small or micro businesses. Those pushed, in this research, were often from a regional location, or had little employment opportunity, past employment issues and family commitments. Those pulled into small business sought independence through being one's own boss, disliked male dominated workplaces, and wanted a better work/life balance. For these women, further expansion or diversification of a business may be hampered by family commitments and work/life balance issues. Some were also not concerned with increasing their business size or income, and were content to just meet financial commitments. Thus aspirations for future paid work for women in small business were varying in degree and not necessarily for more financial gain. Women returning to work have high aspiration for paid work but have poor labor market outcomes due to study choice, family commitments, and work/life balance issues. Girls and young women are choosing highly feminized, low paid career paths, adding to their risk of financial insecurity. Again, aspirations for paid work are high, yet they are being set up not to achieve this at a level that will provide financial security. Rural based women, in general, choose employment that is available in their local areas, yet there is often little employment opportunity, and a lack of access to education hampers their efforts, as do family commitments.

1.2 Career and Job Advice

All groups had very little access to career and job advice. Job, education and training advice was short sighted, gender biased, and not career oriented.

For women of low socioeconomic status, very little career and job information is accessed due to time commitments, literacy levels, lack of access to education and training providers, employment services, and lack of access to school career advisors due to early leaving. Information that was accessed came mainly from Job Centres, TAFE, family and friends. Internet and media sources were used very little due to literacy and access issues.

Aboriginal women are concerned with acquiring a learning and career pathway, as part of a commitment to lifelong learning and economic security; however, they receive very little information on either. Career and job advice is either community based or ad hoc. Community based advice can come from elders and other members of the community, or is grounded in the historical practices of a community, for example, indigenous art based businesses. Other sources are accessed via involvement in VET, yet structured information dissemination is not reaching remote Aboriginal communities. Low language and technological literacy make access to information more difficult. Suggestions made by respondents for obtaining this information include mobile career and job expo's that reach remote centres.

Women in micro and small businesses also had very little access to career advice, particularly before starting up their business, but also during operation. They seek information in several forms including written, verbal and electronic, as well as provision for online learning and for it to be at a useful level for their stage of business and prior education levels.

Women returning to work or retraining found access to career and job advice difficult, seeking entry advice, course selection, and career guidance that is appropriate for their stage of life. Marketing of career services is not evident to this group of women.

For girls and young women, career advice comes mainly from school careers advisors, with some from family and friends. The overrepresentation of girls in feminized and low paid areas, in high school and TVET classes, shows the lack of research and strategic planning to improve career and job outcomes for girls. The girls are not encouraged to 'think outside the box'. The girls were aware of what jobs entailed, but were not aware of pay rates, job availability, emerging technologies and employment forecasts. They sought further information on how to be successful in their chosen career and how best to apply their VET courses. Most girls felt they were already on a career path and planned to do further study in the area.

1.3 Networking

Few women were participating in any professional or business network. Many expressed an interest, but were concerned about male dominated attendance and 'old boys' networks. For those who could access these groups, a women-only environment would be most inviting. Each of the groups would benefit in unique ways from networking with other women, particularly those women in small business, or those returning to work.

2. How do women see education and training contributing to their needs/aims?

Most women see education and training contributing to their aspirations for paid work, and their levels of participation support this even more so. Their expectations of education and training are high and expected changes are seen to cover many aspects of a women's life.

2.1 Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Women of low socioeconomic status regard VET as a means to positive work outcomes, work plans, and employment skills as well as interpersonal skills and personal development. Education levels were low across this group, yet two-thirds of those surveyed were currently studying and a further two-thirds wanted to do more study in the future. In line with general statistics, those studying had fewer children, were born overseas and were less likely to have a disability. Lone mothers found access to education more difficult than others in this group, because of financial and family commitments. Women born overseas in this group were more likely to access VET; however, this did not always lead to gainful employment due to language barriers and lack of recognition of prior learning.

Aboriginal women want to acquire lifelong learning pathways and see VET as important to accessing employment and thus economic security. They want Traineeships and Apprenticeships made accessible for themselves and their young people in trades that can benefit their communities. They see education as the way out of extreme poverty for the next generation. Aboriginal respondents sought to use VET to up-skill for the betterment of their communities, as well as for enjoyment and an opportunity for practical application. The women seek practical skills such as building maintenance, first aid and driving licenses.

Low literacy levels cause problems for those Indigenous women trying to manage their community as they often have very little English or Maths skills. However, there is a desire to learn these skills, particularly on a practical level for legal and health related causes. Computer literacy would make distance education and e-learning a greater possibility; however, computer training would need to occur first, which may be logistically difficult. Training that physically takes place within remote communities would be better accessed by those with community and family responsibilities. Again, the suggestion of taking services to the people that need them, via mobile education for initial training, and then setting up facilities for ongoing use, would be advisable. This would require policy and funding commitment.

Aboriginal women's training needs include: community self-determination; training and qualifications for community based employment; functional literacy and crisis management. Crisis management is of utmost importance to remote Aboriginal communities, however, support and action is required from policy makers, including individual action training and education, which has been proven to have a knock-on effect to other members of the community. Crisis management workers in Aboriginal communities have little or no current training and it is not easily accessed. Obviously, training in this area would provide a more stable environment for general education and training to succeed.

Women in micro and small business value VET and would generally like to participate in it in the future for obtaining qualifications and training to maintain current skills and

knowledge. Those in the research group who had already accessed VET did so to obtain direct business skills; update and gain skills to offset their partner's, to gain other employment and for professional development. Areas studied mainly included direct application to their business such as accounting and computer courses, or specialist areas of business knowledge. VET was seen as an option for training employees; however, the cost and length of courses were prohibitive. Online learning was not generally accessed, however many women were interested in pursuing it.

Interestingly, the main reason women returning to work were participating in VET was personal development, confidence and self esteem, then up skilling or updating, to access higher education levels and finally, least of all, to obtain employment. 60% were currently studying VET and nearly half intended to undertake VET in the future. Those studying felt it would change their present situation, would lead to employment and would benefit their career plans. They felt VET was significant and rated it highly. Overall, VET was seen by these women to lift confidence, skills and access to employment.

VET was very popular with girls and young women, with many feeling it more relevant than school, as they see it providing practical experience and employable knowledge. Areas of study chosen are highly feminized and 'traditional'. The girls felt they were already on a career path and the vast majority wanted to study more in their chosen areas, as they were highly satisfied with their courses.

2.2 Work Placements

Work placements and on-the-job training allow women undertaking VET courses to put into practice the skills they have acquired in class, whilst learning valuable new knowledge of both workplaces and often the industry or occupation they intend to pursue. All groups reported a high preference for the inclusion of work placement as part of their VET course, as well as the opportunity for on the job training, as it gave them practical experience, a chance to learn from others in the business, and confidence to move into employment, and sometimes a 'foot in the door' with employers. Taster courses were popular with women returners, as were workshops and courses that introduce new and emerging technologies.

2.3 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Since the establishment of the national training framework almost two decades ago, women had great hopes for the implementation of an accessible system to assess and so formally accredit or 'recognise' their prior learning (RPL). Disappointingly, an overarching policy for RPL for women is still, in the main, an unfulfilled dream. RPL still remains an issue for women, and high demand for local, accessible RPL services continue. Where it is available, the systems in place are often complex, time consuming, difficult to access, &/or expensive.

Small business owners, returners, Aboriginal women and women migrants or refugees were most concerned with obtaining RPL. Small business owners gain much experience, skill and knowledge through their business operations, however, it is difficult to prove or transfer this to RPL requirements. Women returners have similar difficulties, including proving past employment or qualifications, often from some time ago. Aboriginal women also have high levels of experience in their jobs and practical experience in their communities, however, linking this with pre-set RPL requirements is not easy. For migrants or refugees, transfer of education and qualifications is not simple, and proof can be impossible for those who have left their homes in haste or come from countries where there is less registration of skills. The RPL process needs to be accessible, affordable and appropriate to the needs of the applicant, and must be well advertised.

3. What are women's experiences in work related education and training?

All groups of respondents had experienced VET and the vast majority found it a highly positive experience. Although all groups placed great hope in their education to produce enhanced employment outcomes, VET was shown in this sample not to meet the labour market outcome requirements of Aboriginal women, women of low socioeconomic status, women returning to work and retraining, and women in small business. Outcomes for girls and young women are yet to be discovered, however, historical data proves their choices will not place them in an economically secure environment.

Re/identification of women including, women and girls who are further 'at risk' within VET policy and delivery mechanisms would be a basis for developing flexible, relevant and current courses, that take into account the many aspects of women's lives. The existing structure of VET must change from a masculine trade oriented one to a diverse structure, built around the needs of clients.

The cost, time, flexibility, relevance, and currency of VET courses, together with a lack of support services, and recognition of prior learning, and little research into the needs of each of the groups, a lack of strategy to implement appropriate VET policy, as well as inadequate marketing towards these groups, restricts enrolment and outcomes in VET, and thus the experiences of women accessing VET.

Flexibility is the key to successful participation for women in VET. This means taking the time to research the needs of women and working courses to support these, rather than asking women to change their lives to suit the traditional structures of VET providers.

3.1 Cost

The cost of VET courses is prohibitive to many women, not only the cost of tuition, but the cost of books and other implements for learning. Child care, travel and less time in paid employment are all costs that must be taken into account by women considering VET. An increased range of financial support services should be made available and widely promoted and should be easily accessible and preferably of no or low interest. Tax incentives for child care for those in paid work or work-related study (training) would be helpful.

3.2 Time

The scheduling of courses should take into account the lives of women and their outside commitments. Also, the length of classes and courses must be suitable to their needs, and should consider school holidays and school/child care operating hours, as well as flexibility for those who may need to study outside normal working hours.

3.3 Course Range and Promotion

The range of courses currently recommended to women is narrow and highly feminized; they are overrepresented in courses such as child studies, beauty and hairdressing, hospitality and business administration. These industries are generally low paid, have low skill requirements and little room for advancement. Women should be encouraged into non traditional areas, preferably with other women to enhance the potential of a critical mass especially in highly masculinised industries and occupations. This is particularly so in areas of predicted employment growth, skill shortage and emergent industries and occupations. Courses must be up to date, taking into account new technologies and their practical application.

There is a lack of promotion of courses that meet the specific needs of women. Marketing of courses for 'at risk' groups requires funding and policy commitment, as 'normal' channels for marketing courses may not be appropriate or accessible. For example, this research showed that women see VET as generally applicable to younger people, thus older women should be targeted by marketing to promote availability and applicability.

3.4 Child Care and Family Commitments

All groups had requirements for child care that was easily accessible and reasonable in cost to support success in education and employment. Most relying on child care support services were; women of low socioeconomic status, particularly migrants, refugees and lone mothers, women in small business, women returners and Aboriginal women. Other family responsibilities were also highly influential on education participation, with many women reporting carer, volunteer and other unpaid work, creating further time and pressure issues weighed against opportunity for employment or education.

For Aboriginal women in remote communities, education and employment are less accessible due to higher rates of child birth. And thus child care is a crucial issue for these women and their communities. For refugee, migrant and lone mothers, access to child care is of great importance as they may not have the contacts and informal support services that other women have and they are more likely to live in poverty making cost a further issue. For women of low socioeconomic status, financial insecurity can make the cost of child care prohibitive. For women in small business, the cost and availability of child care is an important factor in the success of their livelihood and their ability to expand operations. This is also the case for women returning to paid work, who need child and after school care so they can re-enter the labour market more easily.

3.5 Rural

Rural issues, in terms of education participation and experience, include; lack of physical access to education providers and the ensuing difficulty of spending time away from home; the relevance of courses being held to the employment needs of the area; and lack of technological literacy to take advantage of online learning. As with other women, the opportunity cost, timing and flexibility of courses is a major concern for rural women.

3.6 Literacy

Literacy issues were evident across all groups of respondents. Literacy inadequacies cause problems for those Indigenous women who are trying to manage their community as they have very little English or mathematics skills, including lack of understanding of western financial systems, leaving them vulnerable to financial predators. There is a strong desire to learn English, particularly practical language to ensure understanding of legal and health related information.

Literacy and language issues affect refugee and migrant women's experiences of education and training as well as employment. A lack of strong literacy skills can also be a hindrance to early school leavers and women of low socioeconomic status.

Computer literacy is important for all women for education and employment opportunities, as well as personal development. It also opens the opportunity for self directed learning, decreasing time pressures. Computer and technology literacy would make distance education and e learning a greater possibility for rural women and remote Aboriginal communities, as well as other women who would find this a better option, however training is needed and policy commitment required. For women returning to work, computer and technology up skilling are very important for their successful transition to the workforce and for women in small business, keeping up to date with technology changes is crucial, as it is for young women and girls in education.

4. What policy directions and programs would best support women in the interlinking areas of employment, education and training?

Work related education and training, and employment are closely linked through the value and aspirations women place on them to provide economic security for themselves and very often their families. Irrespective of their participation and engagement with VET, women and young girls' employment outcomes are less advantageous than those for men and boys. Cross sectoral policies must be developed that can best support enhanced outcomes for women and girls through the interlinking areas of education, training and employment. WAVE recommends the following policy direction.

4.1 Systemic Change: Making Equity and Inclusiveness a Principal of the Australian National VET system.

- A. Women's and girls' diverse needs to be explicit in VET policy.
- B. Change from the present gender neutral policy approach to recognition of women as a major client with diverse needs, to reduce the impact of poor labour market outcomes.
- C. A policy should be devised for women and girls in VET exclusively, including VET in schools, grounded in adequate funding, resources and evaluation using measurable targets.
- D. Broad based training concerning gender is required at policy making and managerial levels, and should be included in professional/staff development programs.
- E. Research and analysis should support policy directives.

DEST (2005) supports the need for national research and analysis, recognizing it has a critical role in policy development, setting future directions and evaluating performance.

Areas requiring further national research include:

- More broad based studies to uncover the specific issues and needs of specific groups of women and their links with intergenerational poverty.
- Broad based research into the knowledge base and practices of career advisor professionals, by VET providers and schools, government employment agencies and so on, including recommendations for how such professionals can enhance outcomes for women and girls.
- Broad based research into young women's career choices at school
- Innovative approaches linked with international best practice, to enhance the participation and retention of women in 'non-traditional' occupations and industries. This should include related studies into workplace practices and cultures.
- Longitudinal studies to track and link the pathways of girls and young women from school through further training and on into their labour market outcomes are essential to evaluate the impact of current policy.

- The practical education needs of Aboriginal women and longitudinal studies to evaluate medium and long term success.
- Longitudinal studies of all specific groups of women and girls to ensure current strategies are beneficial.

Recommendation:

National research and analysis be resourced to inform and shape policy to promote sustainable systemic change leading to positive outcomes for women in the workplace.

4.2 Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty

A national whole of government approach to poverty is needed, informed by a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of poverty and the impact of intersecting causes of disadvantage. National benchmarks for measuring poverty are vital, and an anti-poverty strategy that integrates local, state and national policies and demonstrates a commitment to achieving targets is required. Women of low socioeconomic status, migrants and refugees, indigenous and lone mothers, are groups that must be included in poverty legislation. The intergenerational cycle of poverty will take time, commitment and cooperation across all levels of government and across sectors to achieve, and the Commonwealth Government is well placed to provide leadership in this. Such policies and interventions will also act to protect new Australians and those new to poverty from creating their own generational poverty.

Access to information regarding employment services, employment needs and education opportunities are needed to steer women clear of repeating life cycle patterns in order to provide opportunities to choose education and career pathways out of poverty.

Recommendation:

A whole of government response be devised to support women in poverty to improve their opportunities. This approach is to position VET to address interdepartmental/cross sectoral issues around the inter-related issues of training, employment and labour market participation, and welfare policies - all impacting on women. The re-positioning of training is a means to improve the economic sustainability of women.

4.3. Targeted Strategies

4.3 1 Career guidance be informed by workplace trends

Gender sensitive labour market training and professional development are of central importance for all educators or counsellors involved in career and subject selection advice, work experience placements for women in VET, and/or the development and offering of vocational courses in schools. There is opportunity for cross-sectoral and cross-government collaboration in the critical area of career guidance, in order to provide quality, relevant, timely and appropriate career advice to and respond to career information needs of all groups of women. This includes making information and advice accessible to those in rural communities.

Recommendation:

Career planning information to be actively informed by labour market analysis and trends within a framework of recognizing gendered workplace implications.

4.3 2 Recognition of prior learning

Increase the provision and access to recognition of prior learning services so women have improved options for the assessment of employability skills without needing to attend courses, reducing unnecessary time in education, and maximizing time in paid employment.

Recommendation:

Improvements be made to the current RPL policy that encourage equitable use and accessibility.

4.3 3 VET delivery must be flexible to cater for women's needs

The delivery of more flexible (time, mode and content) training qualifications are required to meet the needs of women up skilling, preparing for return to work, those returning to study and those in business, building on models of good practice identified through national programs such as Learnscope and Reframing the Future.

Recommendation:

Flexible delivery options be expanded to meet the diverse needs of women students.

4.3 4 Clearer links between VET, employability and enhanced employment outcomes are needed

The following strategies could be applied to course provision across the VET sector and would help to improve flexibility and improved outcomes from training. This strategy list can address the need for community or locality responsiveness:

- Foster employability with greater practical application and work placements in VET and university courses
- Make available more hands on and practically oriented courses, such as taster and refresher courses, particularly in industry areas that currently have low participation levels of women, and are experiencing skill shortage.
- Training awareness and use of new and emerging technologies in the workplace are needed to increase participation, and enable certain groups of women to increase their employability.

4.3 5 Incentives and support for women entering education and/or training or employment

Women to receive relief from financial disincentives to enter education and training. Various financial support services should be made available, with greater promotion, to cover: child care; tuition; additional course tools and travel costs.

Financial support to be given to those entering employment, possibly in the form of tax incentives for child care. Extra support and time for those leaving welfare payments should be provided. Additional strategy and funding is required to lessen caring responsibilities, inequitably placed on women, that is preventing their entrance into education, training and employment.

Recommendation:

Incentives be developed to encourage women into education and training which supports employment.

4.3 6 Unemployment and the working poor

All women are at risk of unemployment, with certain groups such as migrants, refugees, lone mothers, rural based, and Aboriginal women, more at risk of unemployment, and being part of the working poor. Increasing casualty of the workforce, and a policy environment that puts workers rights at risk, leaves women at risk of exploitation and with little chance of moving out of poverty.

Recommendation:

A national policy and regulatory bodies must represent women and give them access to information in case of exploitation. Specific interventions include adequate resourcing of support agencies.

4.3 7 Language and technology literacy

Access to immediate and ongoing language literacy for new Australians must be provided. Policy and funding to be directed at encouraging participation in literacy classes for those with low general literacy. Technological exposure and training be provided, particularly to Aboriginal women, women returning to work and retraining, older workers and women of low socio economic status.

Recommendation:

Language and technology literacy be at the forefront of education policy and direction for those listed here as most requiring it.

4.3 8 Data collection and reporting

A guiding principle in 'Skilling Australia' (DEST 2005a) is to improve the collection and reporting of data on the performance of the national system to inform future policy and planning directions. An opportunity is available to streamline data collection and reporting requirements, with the linking of VET in schools reporting to state/territory annual VET planning processes.

Recommendation:

The collection of data for VET including VET in schools must be gender disaggregated as a matter of course. Monitoring and data collection needs to provide information regarding access (self-funded, user choice, employer funded) participation (inc qualifications, levels, industry areas) and outcomes by gender, age, cultural background, (dis)ability and location.

It is also recommended that DEST report on achievements in relation to women annually, measured against set targets, and require states/territories to do the same, using 5 and 10 year trend data. This will enable national and state/territory governments to systematically evaluate the impact of current policy and strategic interventions and inform future policy development.

4.3 9 Leadership Directives and networks be strengthened for women

The Australian Federal Government has made a commitment (Coalition 2004) to capacity building for women and in particular, in supporting some initiatives to promote women in leadership. The new national agenda for training involves the establishment of a number of Advisory groups, National Action groups, Roundtables and Committees and thus is an ideal opportunity to include representation from National Women's Secretariats including Security4Women to represent diverse women's needs in VET.

Policy must be directed towards increasing women's participation in business and professional networks. Women-only networks are preferred and participation should be encouraged through funding opportunities and targeted marketing.

Recommendation:

Women from member organisations of the National Secretariats be promoted into National Advisory Groups, National Action Groups and Roundtables which inform VET, to ensure high level accountability to Australian women. Women should also be targeted by policy and funding to join business and professional networks.

4.3 10 Girls' education and training opportunities to be expanded and supported in the new Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs).

Given the low participation rates of girls and women in the traditional trade areas and that girls have untapped potential in terms of participation in trades, the opportunity can be embraced to establish technical colleges which positively encourage young women's participation. Moreover, Boards and Councils of ATCs should include representation to advocate for women and girls.

Recommendation:

Widely devised, and locally responsive initiatives be promoted, resourced and evaluated to incorporate young women and girls' involvement - participation through to successful completion - in skills shortage measures.

5. Conclusion

Although women and young girls continue to increase their participation in VET, and the majority value and enjoy their experiences, on the whole, the subject areas they enrol in do not enable women to achieve enhanced (or often gainful) work outcomes. A seriously deficient system of information dissemination and career 'guidance' tends to continue the promotion of highly feminized, and most often low paid, low skill requirement industries, to women from school age right through to older workers, as recommended study and work pathways. For each of the groups of women represented in this report, a pattern of high expectation and dedication, overcoming several diverse accessibility issues, including child care and finance access; time; recognition of prior learning; literacy and remoteness, meets recurring unemployment and underemployment.

A whole of government approach to the VET system and its links to employment for women, including the development of gender sensitive research, planning, monitoring and reporting systems synthesizing local, state and national policy, is required to meet the needs of women and young girls' economic security and financial well being. This, in turn, will enhance the nation's skill base, and economic competitiveness, as well as contributing to a more equitable and less divisive society where the well being of all citizens is perceived as an achievable outcome.

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Appendix I

LIFELONG LEARNING: WORK RELATED EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR WOMEN

In this research S4W will focus on work related education and training for women of all ages and undertake specific policy analysis so that relevant policy recommendations and directions for action can be developed to effect positive changes for women.

S4W will use this project to:

- raise community and government awareness about these factors, and advise in the development of government programmes,
- contribute to national policy reform agendas relevant to economic well-being for women
- enhance and improve results for women where need is indicated through consultation with other relevant bodies, organisations and departments

This is an integrated project that identifies priority areas *and* accommodates the diversity of perspectives and needs of ‘women’, rather than generalising across the broad category ‘woman’. It is structured to enable several specific focus sub-projects to be conducted in different locations simultaneously with discreet pockets of funding.

