



Policy Directions: Lifelong Learning: work related education and training for women

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SECURITY4WOMEN

Policy Directions:

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Introduction

Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system has made a significant contribution to the country's economic success. The Commonwealth Government, in its fourth term, has set a new agenda for VET, stating that in order to meet the challenges that confront Australia's economy and its VET system, more appropriate governance, accountability and operational arrangements are needed.

A guiding principle in this agenda, outlined in *Skilling Australia* (DEST, 2005a), is to ensure the VET system is inclusive of client needs and to drive continuous improvement in the delivery and outcomes of training.

It is timely therefore that Security4Women (S4W) is able to provide a number of policy recommendations to assist in the development of this agenda, based on research focusing on the VET system's fastest growing client- women.

Despite the substantial enrolment rate of women in VET over recent years, they are concentrated in highly gender segmented career pathways and experience higher levels of contingent employment, low paid employment in 'feminised' industries, lower levels of employment in professional or para-professional positions, even with high qualification levels. Women also experience limited support from employers for ongoing training. Women also lack access to apprenticeships that can lead to secure employment. It is important to determine why, despite high levels of participation and successful course completions, girls' and women's involvement in VET does not lead to improved labour market outcomes and so sustained economic security.

Women from equity groups do not participate in VET in the same way as women generally. Specific groups of women do not achieve higher award level training at the same rate, nor do they attain program completion at the same level as women generally. Indigenous women, women with a disability and women from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) experience VET differently.

Australia has a long tradition of developing innovative policies in relation to VET. The new agenda for the VET system presents a timely opportunity to take a fresh approach to policy and focus on producing visible, measurable changes in the short, medium and long term outcomes of training to make sustainable improvements in women's economic security.

Overview of Policy Framework

Previous research has consistently recommended that equity should be the central organising feature of any policy framework for VET (Butler and Ferrier 1999). This is in line with international policy approaches, including those to which Australia is a signatory, such as the United Nations Convention on the Status of Women (CSW).

International framework

The international climate supports a broader policy directive that confirms equity for women within policy development. Australia will be required to report to The Convention for the Status of Women 50th Session in March 2006 regarding the inter-relationships of education, health and work as an enabling environment for achieving the gender equality and advancement of women.

Key messages presented at the 49th Session were: women and girls should be kept on the education policy agenda; access to education, skills development and training for all women at all stages of life must be ensured; links between education for girls and women, and labour market opportunities and outcomes need to be improved; and marginalised groups of women and girls require full access to education and training.

UNESCO, and the European Union recognise the need for and have gender specific policies and provision for VET. Australian VET policy for women would support the export of VET through internationalisation. In addition, it would enhance and help standardise the quality of and the Gender and Development (GAD) requirements for all VET related activities implemented through AusAID.

National framework

Skilling Australia (DEST, 2005a) is the new national policy statement for the provision of VET in Australia. Presently there is no policy *per se* to enhance the potential for equitable access and outcomes for women.

Despite a promising period of policy with a focus on women during the early years of the national system of VET delivered through ANTA, such efforts have not been sustained. Ongoing research indicates a strong need for reinstatement of such policy, on a national as well as at State/Territory levels.

The Australian VET system presently has only two equity related policies, *Bridging Pathways*, which addresses the needs of VET clients with a disability and *Partners in a Learning Culture*, which addresses the needs of Indigenous VET clients. While these are significant policies for their representative constituencies, neither has the capacity for full and reasonable consideration of issues and needs and so provision of VET for women who might be categorised as Indigenous and/or disabled.

The release of the support document to the National Strategy for VET 2004-2010, *Women: Shaping Our Future* (ANTA, 2004) saw renewed policy support for women in VET. It incorporated an agreement by all State and Territory Ministers to focus on women in VET issues in an integrated way through annual VET planning and reporting processes. This, combined with the evidence gathered by S4W, indicates that to address women's economic security, appropriate policy interventions in the VET system are critical. However, with the new training agenda, the status of *Women: Shaping Our Future* (ANTA, 2004) is in doubt.

The challenge faced is to identify broad policy directions which give all women better prospects of economic independence and security, while prioritising effective strategies to address the needs of those women who are most vulnerable, economically, and currently least well served by the VET system. This can only be achieved by a concerted focus on and about women, not on 'gender'. International research now illustrates that a gender framework has proved problematic for women.

The following well researched and debated factors must shape a new policy future for Australian women if we are to achieve positive change – positive change for individual women and so for the economy as a whole:

- Australia has long remained one of the most gender segregated labour forces of all OECD countries;
- Women are comparatively disadvantaged in labour markets;
- Educational selections and field of study patterns mirror and entrench these labour force disadvantages;
- A lack of disaggregated data has contributed to misinformation about women and girls;
- The systemic and gendered history of VET has remained unchallenged;
- Policy about and for women and girls must come from a clear focus on women, acknowledging the full diversity of realities and experiences of Australian women.

Legislative framework

- New national legislation proposed under *Skilling Australia* (DEST, 2005a) for passage in July 2005 to replace the *Australian National Training Authority Act 1992* and the *Vocational Education and Training Funding Act 1992*
- *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*
- *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*
- *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*
- *Age Discrimination Act 2004*

Please note, that in addition, States and Territories have their own legislative frameworks, e.g. NSW Anti-Discrimination Act.

Policy Statement

The Australian Government recognises that the achievement of equal employment opportunities and equal education outcomes is dependent on the provision of a vocational education and training (VET) system that is inclusive of the needs of all its diverse groups of clients. The VET system is well positioned to address cross-sectoral issues related to training, the labour market and the welfare system that impact on every Australian's ability to participate fully in and contribute to Australia's future economic success. The Government is committed to creating such an environment through three key approaches:

- Broadening the profile of those well served by the VET system, through focusing on systemic change aimed at making equity and inclusiveness a principle of the National VET system;
- Providing a national focus for and implementing targeted interventions that result in relevant and useful programs and support for groups of women who are currently poorly served by the VET system and are experiencing disadvantage in the community;
- Working with States and Territories to improve the collection and reporting of data on the performance of the National VET system, to measure key outcomes and to inform future policy and planning directions.

Definitions

Access

Access generally refers to the ability to enter training. Improving access might involve strategies such as improving physical access to a training venue; ensuring that selection criteria do not discriminate against learners; adapting marketing activities to encourage all learners, ensuring pathways are in place between school or community and training. Access issues form a sub-set within equity issues (ANTA, 2004).

Affordable VET fees and fee exemption for low-income earners are essential for providing access to VET courses. Timetabling of VET programs to allow for caring and family responsibilities will further enhance the accessibility of VET for women.

Equity

Equity is a term used to cover issues relating to access to VET, participation in VET, and achievement of outcomes in VET. Equity issues cover a wide range of matters. Examples of equity strategies include providing a supportive learning environment; adjusting assessments to meet individual circumstances; implementing policies on fee reduction; developing and using inclusive training materials. Essentially, equity refers to the capacity for all learners to achieve results in training and to receive training in an inclusive environment with inclusive materials. Inclusive environments and materials acknowledge and value the differences between people and cultures; they include rather than exclude (ANTA, 2004).

Disadvantage

Disadvantage can be understood as poor outcomes across a range of social and economic areas such as health, housing, education and training, employment, family and community support, experiences of crime including violence and levels of financial hardship. In general women experiencing disadvantage in one area, for instance education and training, often experience disadvantage in a number of interrelated areas such as employment, housing and financial hardship. Disadvantage is often the result of institutionalised discrimination - practices and systems that operate to positively serve some groups who fit a particular demographic profile, while not meeting the needs of others.

Intersecting issues of disadvantage

Such issues as geographic location, membership of more than one target equity group, low socio-economic-status, limited English literacy and numeracy skills, long-term unemployment and caring responsibilities; incarceration or institutionalisation can act to compound disadvantage. Disadvantage therefore, needs to be understood in the context of these intersecting issues that can result in highly specific needs that require responsive and flexible strategies. It is those women who experience intersecting forms of disadvantage who experience higher levels of educational and subsequent employment disadvantage.

Overview of research

In 2003, S4W surveyed over 3000 women around Australia, to gain a representative view of women's priorities concerning their lifelong economic well-being, despite the many differences inherent in the category 'women'. Women, irrespective of age, educational backgrounds and socio-economic status, were consistent in their choices, identifying the following as the five areas of highest priority: 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. et al/S4W, 2004).

After consideration of available research activities (completed and underway) in these five areas, and the inter-related nature of work-related or vocational education and training (VET) with the identified priority areas, it was decided that in 2004/5 S4W would invest in research into affordable work-related education and training for women of all ages.

The purpose of the research, which was funded through the Australian Government Office for Women (OfW), was to enable S4W to propose policy development and strategic interventions based on the findings to facilitate greater economic equity and security for women. The broad research agenda was set within the context of lifelong learning, a global policy priority adopted and promoted by the OECD and the European Union.

The intent of the research was to identify priority areas and accommodate the diversity of perspectives and needs of women rather than generalise for all women. A useful starting point is to consider the profile of those well served by the VET system. This group are not homogenous and are essentially those who experience good levels of participation, progress through their qualification without barriers and go on to achieve good employment outcomes. The profile of those 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 been incarcerated or institutionalised. This group is also identified by having successfully completed high school, aged 25 – 45, in secure employment and living in secure housing in the metropolitan area. The benefit of identifying this profile is to highlight that it is in the best interests of the bulk of the population to expand the profile of who is well served by the training system. In order to do so, effective measures need to be in place to monitor changes.

Specific discreet research sub-projects were conducted 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 micro and small business, women from low socio-economic background and women returning to the workforce. 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 preceded S4W's work.

Key Issues from the Case Study research

1. Young women in senior secondary school involved in VET in Schools delivery

The case studies conducted in SA, NSW and Queensland explored future work aspirations, information patterns of career guidance and the connections young women in senior secondary school are making with VET and their career plans. The study was supplemented by a broad ranging literature review, with a focus on girls and young women, their VET in school experiences along with transitions to work, in Australia and internationally.

It should be noted that the lack of any national policy that builds on best practice for girls in schools, and crosses compulsory and post compulsory education (school *and* VET) is of high concern, as is the lack of national gender disaggregated data for this group of young women.

Experiences of VET

Young women expressed a high level of satisfaction with their involvement in VET. They could clearly see the relevance of their experience to their future work and study plans, and indeed viewed their VET course as an indication that they were already on a career path.

Career Choices

Young women based their career decisions on what they liked and were good at. Their choices were not based on their future economic security. Generally, they had no information about employment trends, job security or rates of pay in the selected industry so were not making fully informed choices. Their choices are however interrelated to the quality and quantities of opportunities available to them, and are framed by the knowledge of those advising them.

The majority of young women had chosen future careers in traditionally feminised occupations, characterised by low rates of pay and high rates of casualisation. Employment of this kind marginalises young women and distances them from further education and on the job training opportunities.

Participation in school-based apprenticeships was largely in business, retail and hospitality. There has been no noticeable increase in interest in or the uptake of careers in the non-traditional trade areas despite national and regional skills shortages. Patterns seem to be entrenched and related to lack of critical mass of girls and women in such areas, and entrenched masculinist workplace values and cultures in male dominated industries and trades.

Access to Information

The main source of information about career choices was the young woman's school, raising the significance of appropriate professional development for those giving career advice. As girls and boys are demonstrating they are making different choices the implications of the career pathways and selections can be clearly defined.

Career information was seen to be neither accurate nor broad enough to encourage young women to think widely about their choices. Young women received little if any guidance on how or if the industry area of their choice could provide economic security and there was no evidence that schools used employment forecasts or job growth data to help inform young women's choices.

2. Indigenous women in remote communities

This research project focuses on the needs and concerns of Anangu women community leaders remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia. While it is recognised that some of the issues identified may not necessarily translate to broader national issues, for Indigenous people in general, or to VET policy areas, the geographical location of Central Australian communities, in terms of regional and state/territory boundary crossing, offer valuable insights. Issues identified by research participants were:

Community self-determination

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and nationally accredited training are far less important to the research participants than how training can support community sustainability and self-determination. This includes maintenance of culture and language, governance and leadership, advocacy, management of services and Councils, and submission and grant administration skills.

Community-based employment and capacity building

Anangu need training to access existing jobs on their communities, such as governance, administration, services, community care work, education and health, largely taken up by non-Indigenous workers. It includes getting professional development within existing community services and administration, and also training in technical trades, essential services and infrastructure maintenance.

The development of functional literacies

Addressing low levels of literacy, numeracy and other basic education and employment competencies, especially information technologies are essential in remote communities. Many modes of flexible delivery have the implicit requirement of functional literacy in English and information technology (IT), as well as access to IT, thus excluding many Anangu and other groups of women.

Crisis management

Training should support communities to address crisis issues, including addressing the immediate and long-term problems and effects of violence, alcohol and inhalant misuse, stolen generations and social dislocation.

Facilitating training in remote communities

The proposed Training Nintiringtjaku model (Aboriginal community based, accredited, facilitators of training) being developed by Waltja Tjutangku Palyapaya (Doing Good Work For Families) is considered a necessary means of achieving effective support for communities to address the issues summarized above. It acknowledges the pivotal role of women in capacity building, as service providers (often unpaid) and as advocates for training in their communities.

Data Collection and Research

Training needs analyses have not been conducted in remote Aboriginal communities in Central Australia since 2001. Lack of current community training plans can exclude remote communities from accessing training funds. Communities and the organisations which support them need to have access to disaggregated VET data to assist them in future planning and in applying for funding.

3. Women in micro and small business

The research involved a comprehensive literature search and survey of women in business throughout Australia and found the following issues:

Participation in business

The number of women in micro and small business is increasing. In part, this is due to the promotion of micro and small business as a viable career option. There is a greater diversity of women evident in the variety of reasons for starting business, such as child and family responsibilities, alternative employment, improved lifestyle, and opportunity to achieve financial success.

Women's motivations for starting a business are categorized as 'pushed' – characterised as reluctant entrepreneurs who have left the workforce – and pulled – often younger, more highly educated entrepreneurs who are attracted to working for themselves.

Education and Training

Women in small business tend to be extremely time poor, due to significant domestic and workplace roles. Accessing training is therefore difficult.

VET is generally regarded as not meeting small business operators' needs, but is recognised as having the potential to do so. Women's training needs vary from start up to operation, and are generally met through learning on the job, or through training provided by suppliers or industry bodies.

Participation in business networks

Many women do not participate in business groups and associations – primarily because of cost and lack of time, and a lack of the awareness and understanding of the potential of such business networks.

Access to Childcare

The major issue for women operating small business is work/family balance. The burden of the majority of family/caring responsibilities still falls to women who experience further barriers to participation in business and meeting their training needs through a lack of accessible and affordable childcare.

4. Women from low socio-economic backgrounds

The research involved a comprehensive literature search and responses from women deemed to be of low socio-economic status, sourced through The Smith Family in Perth, WA. The research focuses on women of refugee or migrant status, lone mothers and intergenerational poverty. The following key issues were highlighted in the report:

Unemployment

Women from low socioeconomic areas are four times less likely to be employed than women from high socio-economic areas, and if they are in another equity group such as living in a rural or isolated area or from a non-English speaking background (NESB) they have a 50% likelihood of being unemployed.

Over 91% of jobless households are headed by women, and it is harder for them to move into paid work because the income they will earn won't cover childcare costs.

The working poor

Employment does not protect women from poverty. Women dominate the part-time and casual labour force. There are sectors of women who find casual work a means to supporting a balance between work and family issues. However, casual work can be perilous for women as they rely on their employer to allocate them hours from week to week, and the uncertainty of on-going employment is high and stressful. Many women take on several casual jobs at once to earn sufficient income and to protect their income from this uncertainty, without security or benefits. The research shows that casual and part-time work rarely generates sufficient income to pull women out of poverty.

Lone mothers

Lone mothers, who comprise over 86% of sole parent families (ABS, 2003), have the highest risk of poverty in Australia. Lone mothers are the most likely of all welfare recipients to have paid work and still be in poverty, their education levels are low, with over half having left school early.

Early school leavers

Young people from low socio-economic areas are more likely to leave school early. They are less likely to participate in VET, and more likely to earn less and spend periods in unemployment. Though more young men leave school early than young women, young women who leave school early have a very high probability of not accessing VET or employment, and at a rate far higher than for male school leavers.

Refugee and migrant women

Employment is extremely important to these groups, as they usually originate from countries where social security doesn't exist. Both groups have less access to income support than other Australians. Employment tends to be in low-paid areas, casual or part-time in nature, and very unlikely to lead to full-time work. Often, particularly for refugees, the skill level of the jobs they secure is much lower than their educational level. Lack of recognition of prior learning and skills and less access to English language support than men, further traps women in low-paid, precarious employment with little economic security.

Education and training

Education and training is just as important as income assistance in freeing women from poverty. It can improve access to skilled jobs and greater economic security if those jobs are available. However, cost of childcare, cost of and access to training are huge barriers for women of low socio economic status (SES) to overcome in an effort to achieve economic security for themselves and their family. Where women do overcome these barriers to successfully participate in training, this effort is not rewarded through secure, higher skilled, higher paid employment.

Employers tend not to invest in training for casual and non-permanent staff, the majority of whom are women of SES, and where on-job training is available, the inflexibility in delivery often prohibits women from participating.

5. Women returning to the workforce

One of the most important changes in labour force participation in recent years has been the increase in married women re-entering or remaining in the workforce. It is now the norm to have two incomes in a family. The contribution of married women to the economic status of the household is becoming ever more important.

The provision of maternity leave is an essential part of job security for women, which has the potential to reduce the length of time in which women are absent from the work force, making the return to the work force less difficult.

This research project focuses on the needs and concerns of diverse groups of women returning to the workforce. Issues and policy directions have been gathered from participants in focus groups, supported by an extensive literature survey. Additional issues identified are:

Impact of "inclusive" rather than gender specific VET policies.

Present VET policy with regard to women 'inclusive policy' does not support women returning to work policies, strategies and programs.

It has created inequities in the system, particularly for long term unemployed, older women, women from low socio-economic backgrounds, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women and Indigenous women.

Over the last 5 years, as the VET system has increased its focus towards the needs of industry and moved emphasis away from the needs of equity and access user groups. Over this time there has been a steady decline in targeted approaches and the provision of services and strategies for women returning to the workforce.

Advice about VET and employment

There is a lack of information and advice within VET that is targeted, relevant and available in an ongoing way to women returning to the workforce at various life stages. Coupled with this is that the image of the VET sector and the focus of marketing does not target women 'returners' and older women.

There is a lack of awareness and knowledge of women 'returners' of new and emerging technologies and new developments with regard to skill formation and occupational areas, to enable them to make informed choices about future employment.

Support for women returning to work through VET

There is a need to provide more support for women returning to education and training. There is also evidence that suggests many women are faced with very complex situations in returning to study, in family life and their own personal self development and access to qualified counselling is a major need.

Access to good quality child care and after school care are significant for women in their return to work and return to learn, particularly in regional areas.

There is a need to expand the range of financial supports provided to women returning to study, recognising that childcare costs particularly, and dependent on the group, transport, purchase of study resources, pose a significant barrier.

VET and further education needs to more actively support employability

Taster courses, work placement and work experience should be standard in courses and VET options for women 'returners'. Similarly, university courses require greater practical application and work placement to support employability.

Access to the recognition of prior learning and recognition by women of the many skills developed while out of the workforce is non-existent. There is little or no targeted information, effective processes or encouragement to women to have their informal and transferable life skills recognised in this way.

Policy recommendations

To reflect the aforementioned Federal Government policy statement policy recommendations will fall into the following categories:

1. Promotion of systemic change to benefit women and girls
2. Targeted interventions for women and girls
3. Disaggregated data collection to inform policy

1. Systemic Change: Making Equity and Inclusiveness a principle of the Australian national VET system

1.1 Women's and girls' diverse needs be explicit in VET policy

VET policy must avoid the pitfall of a gender-neutral approach and focus on women and girls, leading to optimum outcomes. Despite the success of VET to achieve high participation rates of girls and women, their labour market outcomes remain strongly gender segmented and poor.

It is clear that VET policies that focus on the diverse needs of women are essential in order to significantly improve the women's long-term economic security.

Recommendation:

1.1.1 A clear and comprehensive policy for Women and Girls in VET be developed, and resourced, and evaluated

VET in schools will continue to expand rapidly under the new national training agenda, with one of its aims that 'every young person should find and achieve their potential' (DEST, 2005, p1). Gender specific policy and practice to guide VET in Schools and work experience programs will help encourage young women to achieve their potential and redress current and continuing poor labour market outcomes.

Recommendation:

1.1.2 A clear and comprehensive policy for girls in VET in School delivery be developed and resourced

Broad-based training around gender is required at policy and managerial levels within the VET system, and should be included in professional/staff development as a matter of course. This will also enhance Australia's capacity for VET that is marketed internationally and must comply with AusAID's Gender and Development (GAD) requirements.

Recommendation:

1.1.3 Broad based training around gender is required at policy and managerial levels, and to be included in professional/staff development initiatives

1.2 Research and Analysis 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 are:

- More broad based studies to uncover the specifics of equity groups and the links with intergenerational poverty.
- Broad based research into young women's career choices in school
- Broad based research into the knowledge base and practices of career advisor professionals, in schools, Centrelink and so on, including recommendations for how such professionals can enhance outcomes for girls and women;
- Longitudinal studies to track and link the pathways of girls and women from school through further training and on into their labour market outcomes are essential to evaluate the impact of current policy;
- An investigation into whether women are developing their micro businesses into larger, more formalised small business;
- Innovative approaches linked with international best practice, to enhance the participation and retention of girls and young women in 'non-traditional' occupations and industries. This should include related studies into workplace practices and cultures.

Recommendation:

1.2.1 National research and analysis be resourced to inform and shape policy to promote sustainable systematic change leading to positive outcomes for women and girls in the workplace and in business

1.3 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 SES, migrant and refugee and indigenous women 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 trends 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:

1.3.1 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.

2 Targeted Strategies

2.1 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 girls, and/or the development and offering of vocational courses in schools.

There is a need for information and advice within VET that is targeted, relevant and available in an ongoing way to women at various life stages and involvements with training.

Career information related to micro and small business and the image and branding of government small business initiatives needs to reflect the diversity of operators in the sector. 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.

Recommendation:

2.1.1 Career planning information to be actively informed by market analysis within a framework of recognising gender workplace implications

2.2 Leadership Directives and networks be strengthened for women

The 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.

Recommendation:

2.2.1 Women from member organizations of the national secretariats be promoted into national advisory Groups and National Action Groups and roundtables which inform VET, to ensure high level accountability to Australian women

2.3 Girls' education and training opportunities be expanded and supported in the new Australian Technical Colleges

A significant investment of \$289 million (DEST, 2005a) is proposed for the establishment of technical colleges to address national and regional skill shortages, particularly in trade areas. 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.

Following the same principle as has been applied to the IT industry (Coalition, 2004, p19), it is important that the talents of the whole workforce are harnessed regardless of gender. Creative solutions are needed to overcome the barriers experienced by women wishing to participate in different industries and areas of employment, particularly those experiencing current and projected skills shortages.

Recommendation:

2.3.1 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

2.4 Incentives and support for women re-entering employment and establishing micro and small businesses

The financial disincentives for women business operators require measures in order to support their access to training.

Recommendation:

2.4.1 Women to receive relief from financial disincentives within small business operations e.g. childcare required during training – including out of school hours care - be a tax deductible item for women involved in micro and small businesses
Greater incentives are needed to support sole parents who are transitioning from welfare benefits to training, employment or generating income through a micro business. Specific interventions include increasing welfare supports e.g. the length of time prior to cut off of benefits.

Recommendation:

2.4.2 Incentives be developed to encourage women into training which supports small business start –up.

Women of low SES need to be safeguarded against exploitation in the workforce. 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 such as the Working Women’s Centres.

Recommendation:

2.4.3 The high value of Working Women’s Centres be promoted, the centres resourced and staff trained to safeguard vulnerable women in the workforce.

The delivery of more flexible (time, mode and content) training qualifications are required meet the needs of women 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:

2.4.4 Flexible delivery options be expanded to met the diverse needs of women students

Access to appropriate counselling and student support services across the VET sector need to be improved to provide appropriate and timely support to the diversity of client needs, and particularly to groups of people under-represented in VET, such as women returners, and Indigenous women.

Recommendation:

2.4.5 Student Services be tailored to meet the diverse needs of women students

2.5 Clearer linkages between VET and employability are needed

The following strategies could be applied to course provision and delivery 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 placement 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 skills shortages;
- Increase the provision of work placement and work experience in courses for women ‘returners’ and older women to better prepare them for the workforce and new occupations;
- Increase the provision and access of recognition of prior learning processes so women have improved options for the assessment of employability skills without needing to attend courses;
- Training, awareness and use of new and emerging technologies of the workplace are needed to increase participation, and enable certain groups of women e.g. women ‘returners’, to increase their employability

3 Data Collection

3.1 Data collection and reporting to be disaggregated by gender

A guiding principle in *Skilling Australia* (DEST, 2005a) is to improve the collection and reporting of data on the performance of the national training 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:

3.1.1 The collection of data for VET, including VET in Schools, needs to 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 (including qualifications, levels, industry areas) and outcomes by gender, age, cultural background and location.

Recommendation:

3.1.2 It is recommended DEST report on achievements in relation to girls and 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.

VET in schools will continue to expand rapidly under the new national training agenda, with one of its aims that 'every young person should find and achieve their potential' (DEST, 2005, p1). Gender specific policy and practice to guide VET in Schools and work experience programs will help encourage young women to achieve their potential and redress current and continuing poor labour market outcomes. Such policy direction must be supported by ongoing collection and reporting on comprehensive gender disaggregated data.

Concluding statement

Australia's vocational education and training (VET) system has made a significant contribution to the country's economic success. The Commonwealth Government, in its fourth term, has set a new agenda for VET, stating that in order to meet the challenges that confront Australia's economy and its VET system, more appropriate governance, accountability and operational arrangements are needed.

A guiding principle in this agenda, outlined in *Skilling Australia* (DEST, 2005a), is to ensure the VET system is inclusive of client needs and to drive continuous improvement in the delivery and outcomes of training.

As the organisation of the national VET system and structures is currently in transition, it is timely to review and build a new focus on women as a broad and significant client group of VET. Such positioning, built on a strong foundation of research and consultation, will enhance the opportunity of Australian women, in all their diversity, to take their place as contributors to the national economy. It will also enhance the potential for active engagement in the labour market to contribute meaningfully to the future economic well-being for individual women, and groups of Australian women.

Women-centred policy initiatives, supported by consultation and research and evaluation will ensure enhanced positive returns, for women, their families and the nation. The design features of a women-centred policy framework should be flexible, for implementation at local level while conforming to national requirements and guidelines.

Australia has a long tradition of developing innovative policies in relation to VET. The new agenda for the VET system presents a timely opportunity to take a fresh approach to policy and focus on producing visible, measurable changes in the short, medium and long term outcomes of training to make sustainable improvements in women's economic security.

Policy measures that aim to strengthen the economic outcomes from education and training for women under a rubric of continuous improvement will not only assist in diminishing entrenched and systemic disadvantage, but will also sustain claims that Australia's VET system is indeed world class.

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