

Introduction

The current VET national policy for women, *Women shaping our future* is due to expire in 2010. WAVE is keen to secure a commitment to a new strategic framework with a clear set of priorities and targets. This framework needs to be set in the context of key initiatives of the COAG Reforms and the Education Revolution.

Of critical concern to WAVE is the continuing disadvantage experienced by women in the workplace and the VET sector. The gap between the investment in education and training for women and girls needs to be closed. The poorer outcomes need to be targeted and addressed.

Vocational education and training in Australia provides skills training to approximately 1.7 million people each year (1,696,400 across all states and territories in 2008). This represents 11.3 per cent of Australians aged between 15 to 64 years. Of these 52.3 per cent were male and 47.6 were female (887.500 men and 806.700 women).¹

COAG Reform Agenda

The Council of Australian Government (COAG) has acknowledged that ‘the global economic crisis underscores the importance of further microeconomic reform, including in relation to regulatory reform’. COAG has recently agreed to a workplan for further major reforms to the Vocational Education and Training system. The workplan will address a number of major reform areas including:

- developing models for a national regulatory body for vocational education and training;
- ensuring the Australian Apprenticeship system is responsive to the needs of individuals and enterprises, especially during the downturn and into recovery;
- increasing the level of investment in nationally-accredited training;
- providing timely, relevant and easy to navigate information to individuals and enterprises;
- ensuring the training system, and the products of the training system, are responsive to the needs of individuals, businesses and industry.²

WAVE believes this reform program offers an opportunity for all tiers of government and advocates for gender equality to review VET outcomes for women and girls and identify some priorities and integrate them into VET system. These COAG reforms need to incorporate a gender dimension.

International best practice in gender inclusiveness demonstrates that a comprehensive reform framework will:

- increase women’s qualification level in line with government priorities;
- achieve secure employment for women with adequate training made available irrespective of the pattern of employment (full time, part time or casual/contract work);
- gain full value for women from Nation Building activities and the economic stimulus packages to successfully negotiate the recession and fully benefit from the ensuing recovery phase;
- enable women to work flexibly to meet family and carer responsibilities, while maintaining access to future career opportunities and fairer remuneration;³
- have access to the full range of new employment opportunities based on green skills training for a low carbon economy; and
- build lasting skills that will enable them to leave behind poverty and fight discrimination.

¹ Vocational Education and Training Statistics Students and Courses 2008 NCVER 2009 Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations pp. 8-9

² COAG Communiqué July 2009 COAG website accessed 28 July 2009

³ The Australian Government will introduce a comprehensive Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme for new parents who are the primary carers of a child born or adopted on or after 1 January 2011. This positive innovation will support both women and men to meet their family responsibilities and provide opportunities to share care for young children and work more flexibly throughout their life.

The VET System

Funding for the VET system is provided by the Australian Government, state and territory governments, industry bodies, employers and individual students through fees.⁴ The shift over the last decade to a contestable training market has resulted in restricting access. Recent NCVET research highlights the conflict between the policy of increased competition between training providers and ensuring affordability of VET courses for people from disadvantaged backgrounds.^{5 6}

WAVE's contention is that there is a clear link between women's long-term economic security and equitable access to, participation in, and outcomes from vocational education and training. Vocational education and training offers a pathway to employment to unemployed and underemployed Australians and up-skilling or career progression for existing workers. Research demonstrates that targeted women's programs within VET lead to increased individual agency, well being and overall levels of community capacity.

The policy paper from WAVE/S4W will recommend strategies for making VET more gender inclusive.

Workforce Participation

As at 30 March 2008, Australia's female population was 10,700,779, representing 50.3 per cent of the total population. Of these approximately half, just over 5 million Australian women, are in the labour force. This represents 57.8 per cent of all women aged 15 years and over and means that women comprise 45.3 per cent of Australia's total labour force. Of these employed women nearly 2.2 million work part-time, representing 44.5 per cent of all employed women and 71.9 per cent of the part-time workforce. Part-time work is the dominant form of employment for women in lower skilled occupations such as clerical, sales and service workers, although part-time work is also common among female Professionals.

Women's entry in to the workforce has been the single greatest shift in the Australian labour market in the last 30 years. Women remain underemployed. They are more likely than men to have significant breaks in employment due to their caring roles in families. When they are out of the workforce they are less likely to access government services which lead to an under-reporting of the true level of women's unemployment (7).

VET Participation

In 2007, 794,200 women enrolled in vocational education and training (VET) courses, representing 47.7 per cent of all VET students. 136,850 of these women were enrolled in apprentices and traineeships, which represents 33.0 per cent of all apprentices and trainees in-training. Despite these encouraging figures, data just released highlight falling female enrolments in apprenticeship courses.

The Benefits of VET

The link between higher levels of qualifications and labour force participation is clear and the VET sector can play a critical role in lifting women's labour force participation and thereby their life long economic security. (Ref Appendix A Table 1.1: relationship between education level and labour force participation for Australian women).

COAG has emphasized the importance of increased qualification levels for young Australians under its *Earn or Learn program* to ensure that young Australians are able to meet their full potential as productive citizens.

4 *ibid* pp. 4

5 Karmel, T, Beddie, F & Dawe, S (Eds.) (March 2009), *Competition in the Training Market*, Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

6 This is highlighted by the recent announcement of the South Australian government to remove low uptake courses in rural and regional areas including women's studies. Where markets are thin, the needs of disadvantaged students are vulnerable to profit based VET provision.

7 Richardson, David (2009) *Exits and Entrances: the impact of the recession on women* (Draft in Confidence) The Australian Institute

WAVE's Priorities

WAVE promotes gender-based analyses and approaches to reform in the VET sector to ensure that women's learning needs are met. WAVE argues for informed and proactive gender inclusive provision of VET, including teaching and learning, through the establishment and maintenance of women-friendly and safe VET learning environments and strengthened links to women friendly employers and enterprises.

Recommendations

WAVE & S4W make the following recommendations for inclusion in the VET reform agenda.

That COAG:

- Develop a VET strategic framework for women with a clear set of priorities and targets with performance accountability mechanisms for VET.
- Link VET funding arrangements to key performance indicators for women.
- Ensure there is gender expertise on each/all national VET equity advisory committees and relevant working groups
- Embark upon a national consultation with women's organizations, community groups, industry bodies, training providers, and other stakeholders on the diverse needs of women as part of the COAG VET reform agenda.
- Collect, analyse and publish performance and outcome data, that include trends over time and are disaggregated by gender and demographic characteristics, such as Indigenous, Disability, CALD backgrounds, age, employment status: Participation - enrolments by course level and field of study: Outcomes - completions by level and field of study: Employment outcomes of graduates.
- Ensure that employment creation programs and employer based incentives designed in response to the global recession and pressures of climate change target initiatives that benefit women and girls.

Appendix A:

Table 1.1: Women aged 15 years and over, labour force participation rate by highest level of educational attainment, 2006

Highest level of educational attainment	Labour force participation rate (%)
Postgraduate	83.0
Graduate diploma/Certificate	82.3
Bachelor degree	79.1
Advanced diploma/Diploma	71.1
Certificate level	73.7
Year 12	64.9
Year 11	59.5
Year 10	50.6
Year 9	33.3
Year 8 or below	14.6

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, Census of Population and Housing, (data available upon request).