



Getting Real

Young Women and Girls, Working
Futures, VET and VET in Schools

April 2005

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Section 1. Executive Summary



Executive Summary

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Introduction

“Getting Real? Young Women and Girls, Working Futures, VET and VET in Schools” is the report of research commissioned in 2004 by Security4Women (S4W), one of four National Women’s Secretariats funded through the Australian Government Office for Women (OFW).

In 2003, S4W surveyed over 3000 women around Australia, to ascertain 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, education backgrounds and socio-economic status, were remarkably consistent in their choices, identifying the following as 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 existing and contemporary research activities in these five areas, and the inter-related nature of work-related or vocational education and training (VET) with the above identified issues, 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 aim of this research is to enable S4W to propose policy development based on the outcomes of this research to enhance greater economic equity for women and to define measures to advocate and lobby for policy and legislative amendments on behalf of the women’s sector.

Women in Adult and Vocational Education Inc [WAVE] was commissioned to undertake research for S4W. The interest in girls and young women in the Vocational Education and Training [VET] sector stems from a broader commitment to examine the position of women in Australia within Lifelong Learning, a global policy priority adopted and promoted by the OECD and European Union.

“Getting Real ...” is the first stage of this broad research agenda with a framing focus of life-long learning: work related education and training for women, designed to provide ‘snapshots’ of different groups of women within the area of work related learning and VET - girls and young women; indigenous women; women retraining or returning to work; women in micro and small business, and women from low socio-economic backgrounds.

“Getting Real...” reports on an investigation into the position of girls and young women, in the later stages of senior secondary schooling in three states, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, as they prepare to finish compulsory schooling and enter the world of paid work.

In the past 3-5 years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the vocationalisation of education, especially at senior secondary school level. This emphasis has been accompanied by the development and funding of (federal and state) policies with a specific focus on VET in Schools (VIS) and similar (VET in TAFE (TVET) VET delivered by TAFE, work experience, schools becoming registered Training Organisations (RTOs), traineeships from year 10 level and so on).

Policies and programs have been delivered rapidly, especially at state levels, many without input from the benefit of in-depth knowledge of the VET system, including issues and policy development related to equity. For example, it is unclear whether data being collected is gender disaggregated, as a matter of course. There is now widespread concern that historical gendered patterns may be repeating themselves in the provision of such programs, with the potential to disadvantage young women in terms of career aspirations and long-term economic security, given the ad hoc nature of early choices relating to VIS/TVET.

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The project

Young Women and Girls: Working Futures, VET and VET in Schools.

Locations

Three states viz. NSW, Qld. and S.A.

Aims of research

The segmentation of women's and girls' fields of study and workplace participation remains a concern due to the resulting pay differential that is well documented. While girls' participation in VET courses while at school [VET in Schools] is high it is considered that they may be over-represented in 'feminised' course areas such as child studies, beauty and hairdressing, hospitality and business administration areas.

There is a dearth of research into young women's work aspirations, especially as they relate to VET and any VIS/TVET/VET experiences they may have. Similarly, there is a lack of relevant policy or guidelines for VIS educators in this area.

Research is needed to provide primary data; to ascertain the basis of the career and VET selections made by girls and young women, and whether they feel such educational choices and selection applies or 'fits' in with their future aspirations.

Has their VET [in Schools] and/or early post school experience been a positive learning experience and one that they anticipate they will return to? What are the trends? The issues? The possibilities?

Objectives

- to identify how girls think and talk about their work aspirations;
- to identify the complex set of factors leading to subject and occupation/industry related choices by girls who participate in VET in Schools
- to identify if workplace application/'fit' of their chosen subject is a motivator for the VET in Schools course selection
- to investigate whether the learning experience is in fact a positive educational experience which would lead them to consider VET educational pathways post school

Proposed Outcome/s

Report on the case study to:

- provide a critical literature review re young women, VET and work, covering senior secondary school and school leavers;
- indicate directions for equity related policy for VIS/TVET, with a focus on young women.
- contribute data to 2004/5 large scale research, as proposed.

S4W will build on this platform 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

Methodology

Broad critical literature review - international and national; interviews, questionnaire and targeted focus groups

Key Questions

- How do young women talk about their future work aspirations, careers and working lives?
- Where do they get information from? How/do they plan?
- How/do young women see education and training linking to their life plans and future work?
- What are their aspirations and experiences?
- How can VET policies, and provision best support young women in their selection of career paths, access to and engagement in work-related learning, including especially vocational education and training?

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Overview

The growth of vocational education in schools has been rapid, including the delivery of vocational education in schools, by schools or TAFE or by private providers. During this process it has been observed, anecdotally and in a very few studies available, that the gendered pattern of course selection, and/or field of study is being repeated with school students' choices mirroring those patterns well entrenched in the wider VET system and Australian working lives. The results of labour market gender segregation have been of little benefit to women and are of particular relevance to a study examining linkages between education, work and economic security.

Dwyer & Wyn [2001] are amongst those researchers who warn of the gender blind approach currently informing VET in schools and school to work transitions. In addition a recently published report [Long & DSF 2004] looking into the lives of Australia's young people found that female school leavers continue to face greater disadvantage than males during this period of transition from school to work, with an increasing number of girls not in school, or work. This points to differing outcomes from education based on gender, which can have serious life consequences.

This concern is not new and is supported by numerous earlier reports identifying the gendered constructions of cultural, social and domestic barriers to equality of access and outcomes. Collins *et al* [2000] documented how actions can impact differently on different boys and girls because of gendered constructions, in their investigation into gendered behaviours in schools. Here young women's career choices and priorities were identified as being an important area for further examination and research [Collins *et al*, 1996:95]. And again, concern over career choices and also concern regarding the transition period from school to training or work were each described as 'a critical juncture for girls and young women' [Quay Connection, 2003:53].

The state-based case studies conducted in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland explored future work aspirations, information patterns of career guidance, and the linkages girls are making with training and life plans.

The Findings

The following sections draw on and highlight findings documented in various sections of this Report.

Literature review

The wide-ranging literature review, in its consideration of international and Australian publications, found disturbingly little within the literature to suggest that opportunities and outcomes in relation to working futures and VET will improve for girls and young women in the near future.

This review identified, within the literature, a number of major characteristics:

- a narrow research and policy agenda set within the current economically-driven climate of vocationalism in education, which prevails in Australia and internationally
- continued growth of VET in Schools and transition-to-work programmes
- a gender-neutral or gender-blind approach has subsumed the strong focus on girls' career and vocational needs, evident in the literature of the previous decade
- major funded research operates within a masculinist VET framework

From these major findings, a number of relevant topics were identified, of which four were discussed further

1. entrenched gendered social conditioning that affects the ways girls and young women approach their future career and life choices
2. the current situation for women already in the workplace, that is far from satisfactory, and which young girls are being expected to perpetuate
3. the narrow research base informing VET and VET in schools, that promotes the current gender-blind focus and masculinist framework of vocational training
4. a political trend with potential to diminish rather than enhance the role of women and steer women and girls into traditional roles

The review concludes that discussion of these issues in the literature provides only a partial and simplistic critique of the current situation for girls.

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This review found that research agendas in the area of VET in schools and transitions to work carry (in large part) assumptions that girls' gendered issues have been dealt with. The focal areas have shifted, leaving girls and young women very much out of focus. This 'clouding' of girls' issues within research has been documented, however, with some literature indicating that, for girls and young women, both the current models of transition education and school-linked VET, and the framework of paid work into which they expect and are expected to move, limit opportunities and operate to disadvantage them.

The particular ways in which these factors continue to operate disadvantageously are not being adequately researched. Despite the emergence of recent studies which clearly identify the gendered nature of girls' and young women's VET-related disadvantages and their implications, gender-blind policy continues to drive the agenda of research into VET, VET in Schools and education and training pathways.

The Literature Review recommends that there is an urgent need for broad-based and independent research that investigates the factors that impact on girls' vocational futures, from the perspective of the participants: it is what young women experience, and what they identify as their concerns, needs and aspirations, that must be investigated and used to inform appropriate policies and strategies for girls, young women and VET.

The Interviews

Overview of findings

- What girls like and what interests them are strong motivators in their course and vocational selection.
- VET subjects provide an additional opportunity to school organised work experience to learn about work.
- The majority of the girls are still choosing traditional (feminised) courses and career paths into the workplace.
- Nearly all the girls told us they felt familiar with the type of work involved in their career choice, but then demonstrated they did not know about job availability or pay rates, or how these factors impact on their career choices or outcomes.
- School based Careers Advisors are seen as a major source of information about courses and careers.

- Family and friends rate as a significant influence in career decisions.
- The majority of girls felt they were already on a career track - the vast majority stated they planned to do more study in the career area of their choice - demonstrating a high relevance of education for work
- The majority of the students were in VET courses of their choice and had a high level of satisfaction with VET
- Participants overwhelmingly perceived the skills and knowledge from VET as useful for their futures - either as a career or for everyday life

Working futures: early career choices

The young women tended to base their career decisions on what they enjoy and what they are good at.

In the main, girls' career choices seem unconnected to employment trends and job availability, and are based on personal preferences without supporting information on the sustainability of this choice.

While the young women surveyed had strong ideas of what career they wanted, overwhelmingly, the majority of girls had identified future careers in traditionally 'female' occupations. Girls are continuing to select traditional/feminised areas of work where they are at risk of high rates of casualisation and low rates of pay.

The data indicate that young women think less about economic security when making decisions about their careers and more about a preferred occupation.

While most students tended to have a strong idea of the nature of the work involved in their chosen career, most had no relevant information on job availability or rates of pay in their selected VET area.

Many girls participating in VET while at school are electing industry areas where they are at risk of low remuneration through these areas being so-called traditional areas of work for women. This knowledge is highly relevant to young women and may in fact assist them to assess if a potential career route can provide them with the future lifestyle they want - or can afford.

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Moving from the individual, this factor has long-term considerations due to the disproportionate burden of casualisation borne by Australian women. The traditional female orientation of their work experience and future career aspirations gives support to the finding noted in the literature review that *entrenched social conditioning that affects the way girls and young women approach their future career and life choices*. It also gives weight to the view that *'current political agenda...attempts to steer women and girls into traditional institutionalised role*.

Access to Information

- Students' main source of information about the type of work involved in their career of choice was their school. This was augmented by family, friends, and employers.
- Career information appears to fall short and leave invisible the differing labour market experiences of Australian women and girls.
- Students want more information about how to succeed in their chosen career, and about how to apply their VET course to maximise outcomes for their future

If the information and guidance they receive at school about work, part time work placement, VET subject choice and careers, is neither accurate nor broad enough to encourage students to think 'out of the box' for their career aspirations, then *the gender blind focus* - and the resultant disadvantage identified in the literature review - will continue.

This has enormous implications for the quality and integrity of information, advice and guidance provided at school, and for the professional development and support necessary for staff to enable them to 'make a difference' to the lives and aspirations of young women studying VET

Of utmost relevance is the lack of information on job availability and pay rates of the girls' chosen industry areas. There was little demonstration that the girls received any guidance of how (or if) the industry area of personal interest would or could provide economic security. There was no evidence of any understandings of the implications of gender in relation to field of study or work force patterns and what this would mean to them as individuals.

Connections were not made as to whether pursuing areas of personal interest would provide them with a job, or what the conditions of that job would be like. Moreover, there is no evidence of proactive use of employment forecasts or job growth data to inform girls' choices. As the girls are demonstrating they perceive themselves to be on a career path, there appears to be widespread failure to support these girls by ensuring their choices are fully informed, as they move towards independent futures.

Experiences of VET in schools

- Overall, students were highly positive about work experience programs, VET and its relevance; that the knowledge and skills gained from VET would be useful at some time in the future.
- The girls in this study demonstrated considerable confidence and positivity in linking their VET experiences to their future work and study plans. This strength is also displayed in their satisfaction with following study and career routes based on enjoyment and utilising 'what they like' as a strong motivator.
- Girls were most often in the course area of their choice, with only some exceptions.
- Work experience followed similar choice patterns to courses, with personal interest being the main influence for the majority, while some girls were influenced by family and friends.
- Work experience, like the girls' own casual employment experiences, provide opportunities to learn skills specific to the job, to learn about the workplace generally and about skills required in working with others.

The high level of satisfaction with engagement in VET learning experiences is both pleasing and of considerable importance, as is the finding that the participants perceive their VET experience will be of value to their futures. Comments also indicate that some girls can see skills transferability from both work experience, their own casual employment, school study and VET study for future study and work application.

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Aspirations

- Overall, students felt positively about their futures.
- Many of students intend to do further study, mostly through VET or, for some, at university.
- The majority of students had a positive view of work experience, learning skills specific to industry and gaining a greater understanding of what it is like to be in the workforce.

In recent times, gender-related policy initiatives tend to focus on ‘masculinity’ - boys and men. This is especially so in education. However, VET has long been recognised for its masculinised history and practices (Butler and Ferrier, 2000). It is imperative that policies and practices to enhance the positioning of and so outcomes for girls and young women in their engagement with vocational learning and work experience programs be put in place as a matter of urgency given the ongoing rapid growth of VET in schools.

Such initiatives, supported by further in-depth gender-sensitive research are necessary to redress persistent reproduction of poor labour market outcomes for girls and women.

In summary

The above findings have much in common with the international research that does focus on girls, and their experiences of vocational education and training, work, and work-related aspirations. For example, the motivation for pursuing careers is similar to that identified in Canadian research (e.g. Fenwick, 2004), as is a recognition by young women in the twenty first century, that they will continue to carry most of the responsibilities related to home and family (e.g. Pocock, 2003).

The high potential for the existing global and national/local gendered inequalities to be perpetuated through the choices and ‘pathways’ that the majority of the girls are selecting is also of high concern. This trend will not enhance opportunities for the economic well-being for such girls. Whether these young women continue studies through VET, in workplaces or as students, or if they continue on to university study, seemingly entrenched gendered patterns of selection are being repeated - as ever (e.g. Jackson 2004).

This brings us to ask the question, posed in similar circumstances about similar cohorts and issues in Canada, by Fenwick:

The important question here is, how is it that girls can enjoy higher overall educational achievement but have significantly lower economic achievement than boys? What happens or doesn't happen in girls' career and vocational education to address this disparity? (2004, p178)

Our research findings, précised above, go a long way to answer the latter query.

We argue that appropriate complementary national and state/local policy initiatives and resources to investigate and support girls and young women in their engagement with VET in schools and ensuing career paths is a matter of high priority.

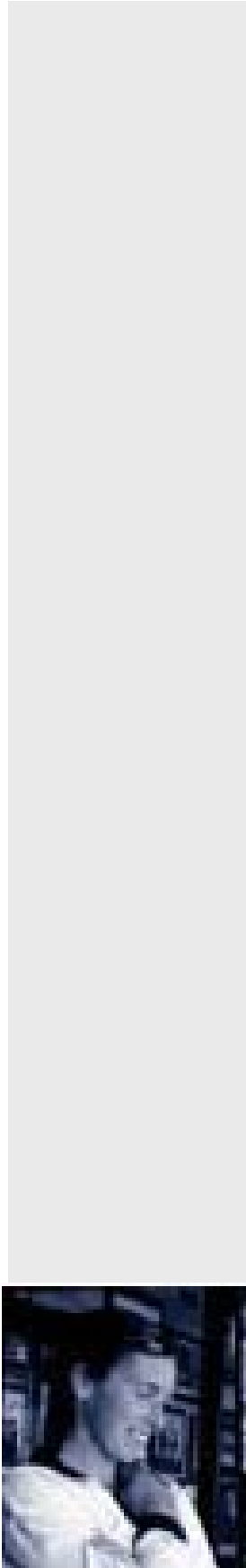
Similarly, the collection of gender disaggregated national and state data for VET in schools programs and associated activities is a necessity.

Such initiatives must engage with the realities and future projections of young women's lives, within the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts that shape their lives. These gender-sensitive initiatives are required from national policy level, to state based policies, data collection, implementation, monitoring and ongoing evaluation of relevant VET programs for girls and young women.

Further, along with the data collection to support such studies, longitudinal studies to track and link the pathways of girls and women from school through further studies and on into their labour market outcomes are essential.

At school and local levels, gender sensitive labour market training and further 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. This extends to industry and employer representatives, given their increasing involvement in VET in schools and work experience programs.

In-service training is a priority for those who give career advice and must include relevant workplace information.



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Moreover, it is essential that in the framing of such initiatives, critical cognisance of historical global/local gendered inequalities that continue to be reproduced must be addressed.

This is doubly important, given the push for girls and young women to make choices around occupations and careers at ever earlier ages without the understanding the implications of such choices in relation to their future economic well-being.

Little change has occurred over recent years to broaden girls' career choices despite the opportunities to learn about work that VET provides. VET offers a viable study pathway through school to work for girls and young women, as it does for young men, and so needs to be promoted as a vital and relevant alternative to university. However, the gender neutral delivery of mainstream VET has missed an opportunity to inform girls and young women of the pitfalls ahead that have long term structural roots in the workplace and implications on their lives and economic standing. Gender specific policy and career education is essential to guide VET in School delivery.

From a Canadian perspective, Fenwick (2004, p 169) posits four directions for change, for girls:

- more gender sensitive career education for girls;
- sponsored vocational education for women;
- management education in gendered issues arising in the changing economy;
- and critical vocational education in both schools and workplaces.

We support similar initiatives for development and implementation in Australia. This is especially important, given the move to re-prioritise skills shortages in the traditional masculinised trade areas, along with the establishment of a new brand of Technical Colleges and the lack of success in either attracting or retaining a critical mass of girls or young women to such trade areas over the last two decades.

This research project, although described as small-scale, resonates strongly with issues that are much wider, for the economic well-being of young women. It is now urgent that wider and deeper gender-sensitive research be conducted in this area. It is time that girls and young women are freed from the jail of 'generic youth'.

We argue that girls and young women should be active recipients of policy making and implementation that support them. Rather than being the recipients of policy and practices that position young women in scenarios of contradictions and ambivalence relating to their vocational futures, VET in Schools must assist them in their ambitions to 'get real', ensuring that the choices made by girls and young women are fully informed choices. Implicit in this statement is the requirement that the VET system also needs to 'gets real' - girls and women comprise over half of its constituency.

What is needed are policies and practices that support girls and young women to fulfill their dreams, rather than setting them unknowingly on pathways that may well compromise their future economic well being.

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