

# WOMEN, EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The link between educational qualifications and work force participation for women is clear. Accessing education and training can play a critical role in increasing women's levels of employment, thereby boosting women's long-term economic security.

Australia's education and training agenda, however, lacks the gender analysis essential to developing targeted approaches that can respond to women's needs and specific life circumstances.

Women and training is identified as a key element in the national productivity agenda of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). In its December 2009 communiqué,<sup>1</sup> COAG agreements included new approaches to expanding apprenticeships, endorsement of a new Green Skills Agreement that will deliver skills for sustainability in the Australian training system, as well as a national regulator, established under Commonwealth legislation and responsible for the registration and audit of registered training providers and accreditation of courses in the VET sector. The Commonwealth Government has subsequently published its Skilling Australia policy: 'to close Australia's skills gap by massively expanding places in a more responsive Vocational Education and Training system.'<sup>2</sup> The COAG communiqué, however, pays no attention to the specific issues facing women, especially low socio-economic status and marginalised women. The Skilling Australia policy does little better, concentrating exclusively on male participation rates and considering difficulty in accessing childcare as a general impediment to workforce participation without acknowledging that it impacts overwhelmingly on women.

This gender-blindness also tends to be true of discussions of factors affecting the participation and performance of those undertaking university studies, where the high overall participation rate of women at undergraduate level leads

to undue complacency. Negative factors of distance and poverty tend to be treated as gender neutral: an indication given in the Universities Australia Fact Sheet on Student Finances 2006 Final Report that females were emerging as a financially disadvantaged group vis a vis males has not been systematically followed up,<sup>3</sup> although there are isolated suggestive studies such as the study showing males to be overwhelmingly the beneficiaries of employer sponsored funding to undertake a Masters degree, an important upskilling accreditation.<sup>4</sup>

In 2009 women's organisations hosted a series of consultations with women across Australia. The resulting report, 'Barriers to Women's Employment, Women and the Recession Project', identified both a lack of access to training and a lack of access to affordable care, not just for infants but also for school age children, as major barriers to women's work force participation. The Skilling Australia policy seems to be making a welcome if partial response to such information when it says:

*Labor also recognises that for those outside the workforce, course costs are not the only barrier to participation in vocational education and training programs. Other factors, such as difficulty finding someone to look after young children, can act as practical road blocks. In recognition of this, a Rudd Labor Government is committed to establishing up to 260 new child care centres, as announced in Labor's Early Childhood Education package, including on TAFE and university campuses across the country.*

Lack of financial resources is however a very real impediment to access. A number of exclusions that operate on possible financial assistance have gender implications. Women who are not formally unemployed<sup>5</sup>, or not eligible in their own right for income security support, are ineligible for financial assistance through VET courses. Women undertaking courses part-time because they need to continue in paid work and/or have major caring responsibilities are ineligible for Austudy. This has been exacerbated in the VET sector by recent substantial increases in fees for TAFE diploma and advanced diploma courses – particularly important to mature-age women wanting to update skills after being out of the workforce with caring responsibilities (as recognised in the case study of Jane in the Skilling Australia policy). These women, even if eligible for the HECS-style loan supposed to offset the increased fees, are likely to be wary of undertaking long-term debt. In Victoria, the new system

is reported (the Age 24 March) to have led to falls (of up to 33% in one TAFE) in enrolments in the above courses – and yet the Government's policy is to allocate almost two thirds of the proposed new places at qualifications of Certificate III and above.

There is a paucity of national support for mentoring and social support programs to assist women into and through training and beyond that into the workforce. There is inadequate government financial support available to women from refugee or migrant groups to develop language skills to a level that would enable them to participate in TAFE and VET programs while sudden death' cut-off from childcare and mentoring supports for those women exiting Jobs, Education and Training (JET) programs is a disincentive to work-force attachment, particularly for young women with dependent children.

## KEY POINTS FOR ACTION: A GENDER STRATEGY FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

**Women deserve a visionary educational and training framework that enhances their participation in the professional or vocational sectors of their choice. This needs to include challenging the norms of gender-association with 'feminised' or 'masculinised' careers, occupations and industries, and opening doors to women to access relevant and affordable training linked to real employment prospects.**

**Women's advocates are urged to raise the following points with Members of Parliament, Senators and candidates for the 2010 federal election:**

- Women must receive appropriate financial and social support to enable them to access the full range of educational opportunities and to perform therein to their maximum capacity.
- The Commonwealth and the States and Territories need to re-frame their national productivity agenda with a training framework to appropriately address the needs and circumstances of women.
- The Australian Government's long-term strategies for Vocational and Educational Training (VET) programs needs to include a gender analysis that will result in a strategic plan for women's training needs.
- Data analysis is critical. Analysing and publishing gender disaggregated data on training will highlight the gaps in providing women with employment skills, and allow for specific improvement targets to be set.

### Recommendations

All Australian Government policies and programs relating to education and training, especially new programs to skill people for developing employment opportunities such as those in the 'Green Economy', must identify possible barriers specific to women's participation and propose ways to address such barriers. In particular, the barriers facing women with disabilities, immigrant and refugee women, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be addressed.

The Australian Government should develop, implement and monitor programs that promote women into non-traditional trades and professions in Australia, with particular attention to addressing preconceived ideas about the capabilities and attributes of women and the rigours and requirements of such trades and professions.

The Government's long-term strategies for Vocational and Educational Training (VET) must be based on the gender analyses that are necessary to inform a training framework able to provide opportunities for women at different stages of their life cycle and appropriate to their gender-specific needs and circumstances.

In order to address the problem of student poverty in the tertiary education sector equitably, the Government must develop a system of disaggregated data that will enable it to identify gender-specific financial circumstances affecting both the access and the performance of female students.

## References

- 1 [http://www.coag.gov.au/coag\\_meeting\\_outcomes/2009-12-07/index.cfm?CFID=485145&CFTOKEN=63297567#productivity](http://www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-12-07/index.cfm?CFID=485145&CFTOKEN=63297567#productivity)
- 2 See Skilling Australia – New Directions for Vocational Education and Training [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training\\_skills/publications\\_resources/profiles/skilling\\_australia\\_new\\_directions\\_vocational\\_education\\_train.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/training_skills/publications_resources/profiles/skilling_australia_new_directions_vocational_education_train.htm)
- 3 The Universities Australia Fact Sheet on Student Finances 2006 Final Report summarised key findings of a national survey of the financial circumstances of students in public universities . . . the three groups identified as under most financial pressure were full-time postgraduate coursework students, female students and Indigenous students. Among other things noted were the following: Female students were more likely to have a budget deficit, less likely to have savings for an emergency, more reliant on free or subsidised services provided by universities of student association, more likely to have taken out a repayable loan in order to study than male students (but borrowing smaller amounts than those males who had borrowed).
- 4 In 1998 a Higher Education Council survey of four representative types of universities concluded: 'This conclusion, that costs are a greater obstacle to women, was consistent with evidence from other surveys that women were much less likely than men to be in receipt of assistance from an employer in meeting the costs of postgraduate study. Our analysis of the Graduate Destination Survey found that almost double the proportion of men received employer support with the costs of study; the pilot survey found that, twice the proportion of men expected this.' (Access to Postgraduate Courses: Opportunities and Obstacles, by Don Anderson et al, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1998, p.54).  
There is no evidence that this situation has changed and both anecdotal evidence and probability suggest that it also applies in advanced TAFE courses.
- 5 Definitions for unemployment as used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics include those people who were not employed for more than hour in the past week, those actively looking for work in the past four weeks, or those available to start work immediate. Many women who want to join the workforce do not fit these criteria, and so are not considered 'formally unemployed'.

Women**Speak**

T 02 6230 5152  
E [womenspeak@ywca.org.au](mailto:womenspeak@ywca.org.au)  
PO Box 1022 Dickson ACT 2602

