

WOMEN'S ELECTORAL LOBBY, AUSTRALIA

Policy Position on Schooling and Vocational Education and Training

WEL supports a publicly-funded education and training system with student needs-based schools funding as its basis. Access to education should be a right of every citizen irrespective of gender, race, age, socio-economic status, sexuality, disability, ethnic or religious background.

Education should be affordable and services widely distributed. Fees should be affordable and fee exemptions, subsidies, waivers, scholarships, cadetships and the like should be part of the mix of financial support with student loans and allowances.

A good education increases the opportunity for all individuals to gain satisfying employment with reasonable income and better prospects for advancement and maintaining or improving quality of life. National investment in education should be maintained at OECD average levels. Such investment is widely accepted as securing the future economy of the nation and its productivity and innovative culture.

Women and girls in Australia have improved their educational attainment and achievement since the adoption by all state and territory governments of non-sexist education, equal opportunity or gender equity policies in the early eighties and beyond. The Commonwealth Schools Commission's **National Policy for the Education of Girls in Australian Schools**, 1987, endorsed by all governments and education systems contributed also to this major improvement in attainment which is continuing.

Nevertheless, there are still areas of educational provision and practice which continue to produce outcomes for women and girls which perpetuate gender inequality and inequity.

WEL is aware that there are state and territory differences, regional variations and differences in participation, achievement among groups of women and girls particularly if they are also of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) background; have a disability; live in a remote area or certain parts of major metropolitan areas; are recent arrivals from war-torn countries or refugee camps; and/or are from low socio-economic background.

It is these compounding differences and some gender differences which generally result in educational outcomes that may have an enduring impact on a woman's life; decreasing prospects, opportunities and quality of life, while increasing the risk of entrenching poverty and hardship with concomitant risk of homelessness, subjection to violence and debilitating cycles of dependence on social welfare and/or charitable support.

1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE)

This sector has been governed by a **COAG National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education** which has been extended to 2019. In 2014, all jurisdictions met the 95% benchmark to have children enrolled in the year before full-time school in quality early childhood education programs. Approximately, 1.1 million children attend ECE services in Australia with almost 150,000 educators, predominantly women. This is a significant female workforce which has an important role in influencing notions of gender and cultural identity.

Providers operate under a single regulatory model and a National Quality Framework within two nationally approved learning frameworks. As at January, 2016 there were 15,166 approved services across Australia offering long day care, pre-school/kindergarten, outside school hours' care and family day care. The majority, that is, 6741 are private for profit providers, with 4519 or 67% of these having a quality rating. Of all other provider types, 77% have a quality rating.

The importance of this sector in laying foundations for future well-being is inestimable.

1.1 Gender Stereotyping. Framework review - WEL supports the work of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority and the various standards set for educators and providers. WEL is concerned, however, that the **Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being and Becoming** is silent on gender stereotyping.

WEL recommends that when reviewing the **Framework**, the promotion of gender equity is woven through the key elements - the principles, practice and learning outcomes. WEL acknowledges from all the research that children's understanding of gender is influenced by their experiences at school, with family, and in the community through media and games. Their early learning experience is critical to their future conceptions of gender, their self-identity, esteem, confidence and notions of their capability.

1.2 Professional training - WEL recommends that reflective professional practice focused on the elimination of gender bias be mandatory in undergraduate and VET courses for Early Childhood Education students. Gender stereotyping in ECE settings should be challenged with the objective of encouraging boys and girls to value and respect each other, be fair in play and relationships so that they may benefit equally from their early learning experiences and thrive as they develop and mature.

1.3 Minimum Provision of ECE - WEL supports a national approach to ECE that aims to ensure that all four year olds access 15, and progressively more hours of quality pre-school per week with the longer term aim of expanding provision to three year olds.

1.4 Trained Staff and Ratios - WEL recommends that this ECE be available in all communities and staffed by appropriately trained and qualified caregivers with child to staff ratios benchmarked against those providers exceeding the National Quality Standard of service.

1.5 Expansion of Public Provision - WEL recommends that national agreements accord priority to establishing more public provision in ECE to ensure that the most disadvantaged children have access which is affordable and of a high quality in a gender fair, culturally inclusive and sensitive learning environment.

1.6 No Budget Cuts to Data Collection - WEL is opposed to any reductions in funding of Australian Early Development Census which measures the physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication and general knowledge of all children in their first year of school. Statistical collections are essential to evidence-based policy making and, in particular, to establishing areas of need. Fields for such collections should be *disaggregated by gender*.

2. SCHOOLING

The schools sector has been a site for debate and contest about funding, curriculum, teaching practice, governance and leadership among many other issues. Schools need to ensure, however, that student participation, performance and achievement is not adversely affected by rigid notions of gender or gender stereotyping setting different expectations for girls than that for boys.

There are over 6500 government schools and over 2700 non-government schools in Australia. The teaching workforce is overwhelmingly female with over 100,000 males and nearly 282,000 females or full-time equivalent teaching staff in Australia.

The development of school curriculum is led by the **Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)** in collaboration with state authorities and the non-Government education sector. ACARA is responsible for providing “a world-class” curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 in specified learning areas.

The Federal Government’s new fairer school funding model was implemented from 2018. It is claiming this as a “truly needs-based funding model”, but unfortunately it is not sector blind with the Federal Government funding 80% of the non-Government sector and only 20% of the Government sector schools. Commentators and experts, however, are divided on whether student needs will set the resource standard required.

2.1 Student Needs-Based Funding Model - WEL supports a needs-based funding model that provides additional funding to schools for disadvantage. It views this approach as a step towards genuine funding reform and fairer funding of school students into the future.

2.2 Adequate Funding for STEM Strategy - WEL recommends that the **National STEM School Education Strategy 2016-2026** be funded at adequate levels. The current national allocation to this implementation of actions is, at best, tokenistic and, at worst, derisory, given the scale of the problem of the decline in participation in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics identified by the Chief Scientist.

WEL considers that this Strategy should have a strong focus on improving girls’ participation in secondary science, computer technology and advanced mathematics as the decline in their participation and attainment is from a much lower base than that of boys.

2.3 Funding for Industry Partnerships - WEL supports partnerships and collaboration with industry to broaden girls’ career and further education horizons. Such partnerships need to be supported by government-funded programs underwriting school and State initiatives so that the current rapid growth in ICT professionals and engineering jobs may be viewed by girls as potential careers for their future.

2.4 ATSI Targeted Programs for Girls - WEL recommends that the gap between Year 12 for young women from low and high socio-economic backgrounds be the subject of targeted national programs initiated by the Education Council of Australian Ministers. In particular, a program addressing the unsatisfactory Year 12 completion by ATSI girls in certain regions, be established with community leadership, involvement and ownership.

2.5 Collection and reporting of Gender Disaggregated Data - WEL recommends that the ACARA produced **National Report on Schooling** include gender-disaggregated data. While there is some data in

that report disaggregated by sex, it is in significant respects deficient because little gender data is presented, particularly as it is relevant to the latter years of schooling, that is, from Years 10 to 12. In order to formulate effective policy and develop targeted programs to address particular areas of disadvantage, it is essential that gender disaggregated data be collected and analysed by educational researchers and policy makers.

WEL recommends that schooling gender data be collected and analysed as a matter of routine.

2.6 Recognition of Gender in Curriculum Design - WEL recommends that ACARA be asked to adopt a Statement of Equity Principles as adopted by the **NSW Education Standards Authority**. While ACARA recognizes student diversity in its curriculum design process, the statement does not mention gender as a key factor among the others like students with a disability, gifted and talented students, students with an additional language or dialect, ATSI students, students from remote and regional contexts or students with any combination of these. There is ample national and international research to demonstrate the importance of gender as a determinant of attainment and achievement. Curriculum documents should encourage all educators to reflect on their practice and to consider the limiting effects of gender stereotyping as well as ensuring that curriculum and teaching promotes gender equality and equity and respectful relationships.

3. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET)

VET is the sector which aims to educate and equip citizens of all ages with skills to enter or re-enter the workforce; to retrain for a new job or to upgrade for an existing job. It was committed to lifelong learning and welcomed adults who wished to undertake further education.

It is a sector which has suffered successive structural and policy reform for more than two decades. This reform and restructuring of VET, the majority of which was once the publicly- funded and owned TAFE system, has resulted in the creation and expansion of a demand-driven competitive training system, much of it private. This has been accompanied by progressive increases in student fees.

This deliberate policy supported by all governments has led to a steady decline in TAFE's share of the public dollar. The private, for profit, providers which proliferate in the sector have a business model dependent on government for their income mainly from student loan schemes.

TAFE Institutes and colleges across Australia, which offered women students a full range of courses and special programs customized to their needs, have been undermined and forced into operating like businesses competing with each other and private providers rather than collaborating as education and training institutions. The economies of scale from which they once benefited have been destroyed by this commercial education business model.

In 2017/18 Federal Budget, the **COAG National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform** has ended with the introduction of the **Skilling Australians Fund** of \$1.4 billion over four years. This Fund depends on a levy on businesses sponsoring migrant workers under new temporary skill shortage visa program.

3.1 Reinvest in VET Public Provision - WEL supports a publicly-funded TAFE system focussed on restoring confidence in and integrity of VET, committed to gender equity and diversity, accountable to government for fulfilling its community service obligations and delivering courses across the nation through its campuses and Colleges, its online network in workplaces and community settings responsive to big industry and commerce as well as small business owners and communities.

3.2 Review VET Funding Priorities - WEL recommends a review of the Federal Government's VET funding priorities to address concerns about the inequitable and discriminatory approach to industry skills training which has the unintended consequence of excluding women because the training priorities are industry-driven, and gender segregation is entrenched in many of the growth industries accorded priority for various support programs. The **Skilling Australians Fund** should include among its outcomes increasing the proportion of girls and women in occupational training that is dominated by men.

3.3 Programs for Women into Trades - WEL supports targeted program funding to address the continuing decline in female enrolments in VET and the small proportion of them enrolled in apprenticeships and traineeships in a narrow gender segregated range of these programs. There have been numerous programs piloted to encourage girls into trades over the years. Inevitably, these have foundered when specialist funding and learning support has been withdrawn. Such programs need to be part of the mainstream of offerings in all regions through all publicly funded training providers.

WEL acknowledges that though women's educational attainment at Year 12 and Certificates II and III in the 18-24 year age group is higher than for men, for the most vulnerable group, that is, those not fully engaged in education and/or employment (those who were not studying or working at all; studying part-time and not working; or not studying, but were in part-time work), there were more young women than men.

Of these, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the most vulnerable with almost 50.5% of men and 66.9% of women aged 20-24 in 2012 identified as part of this group. The Higher Education sector's Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) is recommended by WEL as a useful model to introduce into the VET sector to address some of these intractable issues.

3.4 Labour Market Programs for Newstart recipients - WEL recommends that appropriate TAFE labour market program support be delivered to all young people vulnerable to partial or no engagement with education and employment. Instead of punitive social welfare policies around pensions and Newstart allowances, **WEL believes** we need to encourage these young people and the long term unemployed into education and training with appropriate and qualified levels of learning support. **WEL supports** an increase in the Newstart Allowance which is now long overdue with current levels inhibiting recipients from any activity which facilitates training or retraining.

3.5 Prevent rorting of VET Student Loan Scheme by Providers - WEL advises that the reformed **VET Student Loans Scheme** needs to be rigorously supervised because a concern remains that, private, for profit, providers will continue to identify loopholes in the system and exploit the most vulnerable seeking education and training. Data on enrolments by gender, race, disability etc of those availing themselves of the new Scheme need to be collected to provide the evidence for the effectiveness of the reforms and ensure that the Scheme is delivering the support to those needing it for courses which will lead to secure employment.

The **VET –FEE- HELP Scheme** was rorted by a large number of private providers. During the period when the Scheme's cost blew out to billions, it has been estimated that almost two thirds of borrowers were women. If they completed their course successfully, they were highly likely to gain employment in low paid and increasingly insecure feminized industries. The reformed Scheme has removed many courses, once eligible, from the list and providers de-registered from eligibility for accessing the reformed loans scheme. But in the rush to replace the Scheme, following numerous reports of unscrupulous behaviour

by providers and a national discussion paper exposing the scandal, the Government introduced reforms without an appropriate administrative infrastructure to ensure against future rorting. While there are now loan caps, an approved course list and fewer eligible VET providers, there is a continuing risk that providers will short change students as they struggle to cut costs and survive with the new regime. Large providers are being liquidated or facing sanction from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC). It is time to reinvest in the public Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system and rebuild it to prepare future citizens for the transforming and transformed economy.

3.6 Adequate Student Income Support - WEL supports indexed increases in student allowances, such as Austudy, Abstudy, Youth Allowance and other payments to ensure that they meet basic living costs during the period of a study program.

Prepared by Jozefa Sobski AM. Convenor WEL Australia, National Coordinating Committee. Contact:

jsobski@ozemail.com.au

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