

## **Submission to The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Inquiry into the Role of the Technical and Further Education system and its Operation**

**April 2013**

**economic Security4Women (eS4W)** is an alliance of women's organisations united in the belief that economic wellbeing and financial security are essential for women and will enable women of all ages to have an equal place in society (See Attachment 1).

We agree strongly with the premise that TAFEs have played a critical role in the training and development of Australians for more than one hundred years. For many Australians, TAFEs provide a critical pathway to training and skills which are increasingly needed to access employment. They also play a critical role in regions and in providing access for disadvantaged groups.

One of our core issues is and has been the education and training of women and girls because this is so fundamental to their economic security. We believe TAFE is absolutely central for this education and training. It has the capacity to provide pathways; equity; access; quality career advice; social glue; community responsiveness, collaboration and capacity building. TAFE also has the potential to be affordable even if it is now the worst funded educational sector in a poorly funded sector as a whole.

TAFE is THE ONLY national institution left in Australia for the public provision of post compulsory education and training It has been buffeted by increasing cuts to funding (especially in Victoria, NSW, Qld), competitiveness, cost increases, and program demise, including Outreach programs. There is only **one** Women's Education Certificate course left in Australia now- in SA- and that is vulnerable and continually at risk.

As pointed out by one of our member organisations (AFGW), the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development signed in April 2012 stressed the need for 'recognizing the important function (of public providers) in servicing the training needs of industry, regional and local communities and their role that spans higher level training and workforce development for industries and improved skill and job outcomes of disadvantaged learners and communities" (Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency 2012: 73). Historically, TAFEs have held a special position in building the capacity of people and of their communities. **We fully endorse their submission to this Inquiry and urge you to take note of their considered and informative report.**

Please consider our following comments

## How does TAFE contribute to the development of skills in the Australian economy?

Recent research completed by economic Security4Women (eS4W)<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that there is inadequate attention being paid to supporting women particularly into science and technology based careers. This knowledge and skill base is foundational to and underpins both the growing, emergent industries of the 'green economy' and non-traditional occupations and industries across Australia.

A failure to attract and skill women for careers in these industries has a twofold negative economic impact:

1. a loss of productivity gains potentially available through increasing the skills and career opportunities of a large sector of the labour force
2. the further entrenchment of Australia's highly gender segregated labour force with potential to widen the gender pay gap and reduce economic outcomes and security for women and their families. Governments and industry sectors can and should act to better attract women into careers in these industry sectors. TAFE has a key role to play in this endeavour.

TAFE has had the capacity to engage women in the development of skills necessary for non-traditional occupations and industries; this capacity has been developed over many decades.

TAFE is also well placed to contribute to the increased workforce participation of women, including single parents who have to establish a career and older women who are looking to return to work after significant caring responsibilities. Increased workforce participation of women will lead to significant increases in national productivity<sup>2</sup>. Investment in TAFE is a high yield investment but the returns are at risk with constant reductions of resources to access and equity programs. This is false economy.

TAFE is critical for skill development for women of all walks of life, regardless of their location, age, backgrounds etc as it provides accessible, relevant, affordable, quality, accredited training that includes pathways into higher certificate courses. TAFE can and should link women through gender-informed career advice, into skills training for careers.

Unfortunately, in the past women have been channelled into feminised occupations and industries, and more emphasis is needed on linking women with areas of skills shortages, and especially on taking up apprenticeships. TAFE could/should mediate between industry and worker/learners in this regard.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.security4women.org.au/projects/education-and-training-of-girls-and-women/1439-2>

<sup>2</sup> [www.grattan.edu.au/](http://www.grattan.edu.au/)

[www.security4women.org.au](http://www.security4women.org.au)

## **How does TAFE facilitate the development of opportunities for Australians to improve themselves and increase their life and employment prospects;**

Research conducted by AEU in 2006<sup>3</sup> found that TAFE students are diverse in backgrounds, interests, needs and experiences and span the full spectrum of ages from school leavers to existing workers to mature-aged students. Students are attracted to TAFE to learn 'hands-on' practical skills, because they are "being treated like an adult" and there are "teachers who are willing to help you".

While the students have high levels of expectations about the experience of learning in TAFE, courses and services are being cut due to lack of funds and that significant re-thinking is required about some of the national directions for training packages and the application of aspects of competency-based training.

Research provided by NCVET to one of our member organisations, WAVE, demonstrates that participation in VET results in improved employment prospects and increased earnings, although women's earnings are usually less than those of men in comparable occupations and industries.

## **How does TAFE deliver services and programs to support regions, communities and disadvantaged individuals to access training and skills and through them a pathway to employment;**

TAFE enjoys good support in the community, and people are passionate about their local TAFE. However, there is a broader uncertainty about the roles and status of TAFE, particularly at the macro level (AEU).

We support programs like the TAFE NSW participation program initiative (PPI) that is a partnership between schools, TAFE and the community to provide choices for students at risk of disengaging from school. Each program is different because each group of students is different. PPI programs have been delivered in every TAFE NSW Institute across NSW in 2011-12. Programs like these can be expanded to meet the particular needs of disadvantaged groups especially of women whose disadvantage in the labour market related to gender is exacerbated as it intersects with other disadvantages e.g. with language, cultural background, racial background, low socio-economic status.

Again from the research by AEU, some students described TAFE as providing them the opportunity to develop a sense of well-being as well as achieving vocational outcomes. Such a sense of well-being is essential for women to gain secure and decently paid employment. However, core funding in access and equity programs has been diminishing, leading to instability and uncertainty for students, teachers and industry partners. Discussions about 'mainstreaming' delivery are counterproductive in the context of Indigenous Australians. Mainstreaming other access and equity programs,

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<sup>3</sup> **The TAFE Futures Inquiry was commissioned by the Australian Education Union in 2006. Dr Peter Kell was engaged by the AEU to conduct the Inquiry and compile a report.**  
[www.securirty4women.org.au](http://www.securirty4women.org.au)

unless handled sensitively, has the potential to consolidate barriers to participation and will perpetuate marginalisation.

Access programs need to be seen as part of a life-long learning continuum and a core part of TAFE.

Student poverty has been found to be starkly confronting and influences the work of teachers in profound and moving ways. Students told the AEU Inquiry of the difficulties in meeting the costs of education and the associated expenses of transport, food, accommodation and childcare.

Fees and charges are a barrier to the participation of many in the community who need general education and training. Some form of direct assistance to students is needed to overcome these barriers. Within an environment that promotes the benefits of lifelong learning, this assistance needs to be available for more than one qualification.

Fees and charges are not seen as being fair, rational or systematic, and exemptions are considered ad hoc and an ineffective way of promoting access.

**To build the best available opportunities for women eS4W has called upon the Australian Government to ensure the following national skills and VET reforms:**

Firstly by establishing a National Strategy for Women and Girls in Vocational Education and Training with clear priorities and accountability mechanisms, including linking VET funding arrangements to key performance measures (KPMs) for women and girls, especially those most disadvantaged.

*There has been no national policy framework for women and girls in education since 1996 and the recently expired national strategy for VET (2004-2010) - that called for gender analysis of the top two KPMs - was not implemented.*

Secondly by ensuring that all skills-related Australian Government programmes and policies identify and analyse their impacts on women and girls and provide enhanced opportunities to build the skills of Australian women and girls, particularly in emerging and non-traditional industries.

Thirdly by requiring State and Territory governments and relevant private service providers to, as a condition of receiving Commonwealth funding for VET and related activities, commit to and report against the key outcomes of a new National Strategy for Women and Girls in Vocational Education and Training

Fourthly by ensuring Workplace Gender Equity Agency (WGEA) has the resources and mandate to report on whether Australian government policies and programs are effectively supporting women and girls into career and employment pathways in emerging and non-traditional industries

Finally, by recognising the complexity and challenges associated with gender and how it intersects with other structural and systemic labour market barriers and discrimination, resource WGEA or other parties through the National Research Council, to undertake research and analysis on mechanisms to enhance participation of women and girls in emerging and non-traditional career pathways, including examining international best practice.

The Australian Government should also ensure that its policies and programmes are gender inclusive to meet the commitments made by Australia to international agreements especially CSW 55 2011-Access and participation of women and girls in education, training and science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work.

### **Action is needed now**

Gender inclusive policy action is needed now as matter of urgency to address skills shortages, enhance national productivity and target women's skills development in particular industries including those of the emergent 'green economy' and in mining and construction.

economic Security4Women calls for national VET policies that focus on gender equity and acknowledge the complexity and challenges associated with gender and when gender intersects with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, with disabilities, with culturally and or linguistically diverse backgrounds, with low socio economic backgrounds, with geographical isolation.

### **The operation of a competitive training market and its impact on TAFE;**

The AEU Inquiry found a concern that the federal government is largely hostile to TAFE. It has continued to favour policy responses to skills shortages that marginalise TAFE, and it provides funding opportunities that favour private providers.

eS4W has heard anecdotal evidence of financial inducements into worthless qualifications with private providers as well as of TAFE programs that offer customised training to mature adults looking to return to work

TAFE is working well with students and employers, indicating high levels of satisfaction at the service provided. The AEU Inquiry found that two-thirds of employers want training done through TAFE.

However, in many cases, TAFE leadership and management is identified as remote, autocratic and unaware of the specific issues relating to vocational education; that there is a preoccupation with efficiency at expense of students and teachers.

TAFE works well when partnerships are strong but systems were found to often impede innovation.

The squeeze on resources has eroded TAFE's commitment to access, equity and social justice. This is affecting areas such as basic English courses. Participants have to do more with less. Hours in courses are being cut down by as much as 50 per cent.

Teachers are having to work with out-dated and obsolete equipment.

Uncertainty about funding is eroding the capacity of TAFE to develop long-term partnerships with industry and the community.

Fees are seen as a major deterrent to people accessing TAFE courses.

There is a need to shift the balance of the way funds are allocated.

The use of Annual Student Contact Hour (ASCH) as the only mechanism for allocating funding is an impediment to innovation.

The pressure of competition has led to the axing of student services as TAFE institutes have sought efficiencies and the funding formula used for TAFE does not recognise the costs associated with flexibility, and this has limited choice which has in the past, been one of the strengths of TAFE.

Prepared on behalf of the member organisations of eS4W by

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