

LIFELONG LEARNING AND WORK RELATED
EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR
RETURN TO WORK AND RETRAINING WOMEN.

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1 Executive Summary

The project researched the needs and deficiencies with respect to the provision of training for women returners and women re training

The research consisted of;

- i. a literature search,
- ii. focus groups and interviews,
- iii. national survey.

The research investigated the views and experiences of women returners and women retraining what their aspirations are, how they view education and training what their experiences were and what policy directions and programs would best suit the areas of education and training.

It is evident that the vocational sector need to better cater and improve service delivery for women to enable their engagement with the sector to occur on a more meaningful basis. The research project was successful on gaining the views of many women with regard to supports and these are presented as follows:

- Counselling.
- Childcare.
- Financial.
- Flexibility of course times and content.
- Tutoring and support services. -
- Information –more current and up to date.

A major theme throughout the research is the lack of appropriateness of the VET system to the needs of women users and the withdrawal of services

Recommendation for improving VET training for women include:

- Provide quality of advice and information about pathways into training for women.
- Establish recognition of prior learning that is not expensive or cumbersome and is well understood or publicized by VET.
- Include in training, where appropriate, work placements for women and taster courses for older women re entering.
- Set up a structure and offer training that is appropriately timed, flexible and appropriate for women taking into account their career cycles.
- Include access to on the job training for women to support their skill development and transfer.
- Establish support services such as childcare, entry advice and course selection and career guidance services as part of regular operations.

2 Overview of the project.

The report presents an understanding of the views and perspectives for women returning to work and women returning to study with respect to their;

- career aspirations,
- training needs,
- value and relevance of education and training to their future direction and experiences.

The projects concerns

- How do women talk about their aspirations for paid work?
- How do they see education and training contributing to their plans?
- What are their experiences in this regard?
- What policy directions and programs would best support women, in the inter-linking areas of education and training for work and paid employment?

The project used four methods of data collection a literature search, online survey, focus groups and interview. Information was combined to establish themes and issues for women returning to work or study, in the vocational sector.

The project was successful involving over 200 women from a diverse range of backgrounds from around Australia. The research reinforced the need for the vocational sector providers to recognise the need to review present policy and delivery of services with respect to return to work and retraining women. The work identified barriers that exist in the context of the vocational training area such as lack of access to suitable childcare services and provision of career counselling services and higher fees and costs of living. Limitations and the impact of the adoption of the industry focused framework of VET and the sector movement away from social inclusive and equity policies were discussed and seen to be underpinning constraints for women. Consequences of the policies were also evident through the narrow range and reduction of programmes since 2003 that target women returners and retrainers.

The research also found evidence of short falls in the vocational education area in course and programme pathways, structure, format, modes and flexibility. In particular lack of appropriate information, career development and learning support service programmes and strategies that targeted specifically women returners and retrainers to effectively and efficiently support their return to the workforce, up skilling or retraining. The research also makes recommendations with respect to the relevance, appropriateness and currency of career guidance services and career development information for women with respect to women's career cycles and paths.

The project concluded that overall the vocational education sector shows a disregard for women returners and women re training and there is clearly potential to better cater and improve service delivery for this group with regard to supporting life long learning in the vocational sector.

3 Literature Review

3.1 Key Issues

- Women's participation in vocational training and education is around 48%.
- Women still experience poorer labour market outcomes in relation to employment, unemployment and earnings.
- Within the vocational education and training system there is limited research on the women returning to work group in terms of information and training needs, re entry pathways, targeted entry programmes and service delivery.
- There has been little change in the distribution of women across fields of study and the way women select courses in vocational education, despite structural change in occupations, industries and the workforce.
- Women follow different career development and career paths according to their stage of life, interaction of age, education and desire for a balanced family and type of occupation.

3.2 Overview

The purpose of the literature is to incorporate international and national perspectives and provide the context for women returning to work, women requiring entry training and women in the workforce needing up-skilling for career change. The material has been selected with a view to shedding light on key issues associated with women returning to work and study within a broader overall theme of how lifelong economic wellbeing for women may be promoted.

3.3 Government Policy

Jonung and Thordarsson (1980) state that

“the steps and measures taken in a country to facilitate women's re entry and retention into the workforce depend upon how the authority perceive the role of women in society by government”. (1980, page 107)

Most of the work in response to women re entrants by government commenced in the late 70's in Sweden and mid 80's in Australia by increasing the possibilities for part time work, paid leave and the provision of economic support for mothers. The review literature identified that during the 80's the Australian government made considerable progress recognising that women's pathways were different, yet it is clearly evident that approaches in the development of specific women's strategies were reduced significantly after this period. At first reading one could assume this was in response to “significant progress” of women's position in education, training and employment; however research would indicate that what has shifted is government's policies and treatment of women's roles.

Research of Yohalen (1980), Watts (1996) Still (2002) Johang and Thordarsson indicates that in industrialised nations attitudes to women have undergone rapid change. In the 60's researchers referred to a three typical phases that women move through, these were;

1. a period of work before the first child
2. a period for intensive work at home and with the children
3. return to the labour market. (1980, pp 40)

However the 70's movement for equality of men and women gave some women the possibility of economic independence and self support. For some women having a choice to work gave rise to a conflict between domestic and work roles while others were able to choose one or both roles

without severe economic consequence. These changing roles seem to have opened doors to a new world, particularly in 1980's. This period is also referred to as introducing for some women concepts of unemployment and untrained and for the vocational sector terms of entry level, re entrants, retrainers and returners.

Most of the strategies proposed in Australia during the 80's did not actively come into place until the 1990's. The main focus of government policy since this period has been to remove the barriers to women's entry with equality to education and vocational training being a key element. Readings indicate policy development for women since 2000, has undergone further changes from developing specific strategies catering for women to a movement away from this approach.

3.4 Vocational Education Policy

Vocational education policy mirrors the government's with a significant policy shift in 2000, deeming women as a non equity need due to their levels of participation in training, employment and education. In 2002 policy findings from consultation processes drew several pieces of information together and advised ANTA of policies to follow. The work by Dickie and Fitzgerald (Quay, 2003) principally concluded that women were doing well in VET education and training. Although not achieving good employment outcomes compared to males they were identified as participating well in VET.

The report cleared ANTA of responsibilities apart from marketing VET to women and undertaking consultation at key decision making points through their life cycle. The report advocated support and respect for the choices women make rather than redirecting them into new fields of study, industry and occupations. As a consequence of this report a major withdrawal and redirection of resources was undertaken in the vocational education sector. This shift was toward the adoption of a broad inclusive approach to women while equity policies re focused upon two specified groups, the indigenous and disability areas. Today's statistics indicate that women have progressed well as far as participation in vocational training and education, with participation levels for women being around 48%, 2004. (June, 2001. ABS Statistics). Using participation levels is not seen to be a sound approach by researchers Bowman (2004) and women still experience poorer labour market outcomes in relation to employment, unemployment and earnings.

Graduate data contained in Women in VET 2000 indicate that female graduates achieve poorer outcomes than their male counterparts. In 2001, 70% of female graduates were employed compared to 77% of males. In 1998 female graduates achieved 68% of the comparison to the male graduate outcomes. These findings were also upheld for females and males against age and course profiles which supported the employment disadvantage operating against women in industries. (Dumbrell, de Monfort and Finnegan, 2001) This remains a significant issue in the sector.

There is continued debate that surrounds the policy shift and the impact this has had upon women, there is an indications this is linked to the decline in women specific programmes and courses in work preparation areas.

Many researchers agree the VET policy direction has shortcomings in failing to recognize diversity among women. Bowman concludes that while there is no single ideal policy direction that a combined approach of managing diversity and equity groups is required in vocational education and training. Bowman states the need for a focus on women and the need for specific

strategies catering for different user groups of women. She suggests that the approach be integration of equity into core planning, design and delivery of VET programs and effectively managing diversity as a core activity. (Bowman 2004, Kalantzis, 2003)

3.5 Women and LifeLong Learning

The concept of lifelong learning arises from learning through life, a continuous process of adapting to and participating in learning. (Dumbrelli, T, de Montfort, R., Finnegan, W. 2001).

Lifelong learning is considered as an essential for adults to support or maintain employability. Described as a feature of knowledge economies, requiring people to upgrade their skills and knowledge as part of a continual process to maintain competitiveness and keep pace with change. For this reason lifelong learning is seen as crucial for people who are out of the workforce as their skills and knowledge levels are considered to depreciate. Life long learning offers to women ways of updating or maintaining knowledge, confidence, self esteem and currency of skill especially when supported by educational and vocational sectors that have strategies and programmes in place. Research also considers lifelong learning as part of social inclusion, supporting those who participate in learning as a way of providing wider benefits to the individual as part of their economic and social wellbeing. Education for life and opportunity. (Kalantzis, 2003)

Lifelong learning for women is particularly important as through their life cycle they often take short breaks from the workforce as part of their child birth, rearing or caring responsibilities. Consequently they are also seen as changing employment and often required to undertake transitions of one kind or another as part of their return to work. (Jenkins, 2003) Throughout these breaks in employment they are required to somehow maintain or acquire skills for their eventual return work. This increases in significance when considered in the context of today's rapid rates of change in our work places.

An important aspect of most research for women in this area is what affects do obtaining qualifications have in relation to their return, will qualifications support a more successful return? Work by Jenkins is of particular significance, undertaken in Britain the research sought to track transitions of women in and out of work and the effects of qualifications. The study concluded that there were several factors which support return to work the attitudes were of the women, educational levels, previous work experience, participation in learning and the attainment of a qualification before return. However qualifications alone will not lead to a more successful return.

3.6 Profile of women returning to work.

Yohalens' work described women's decision to leave and re enter work as being one of choice or interest and concludes that those interrupting work for education reasons are hardly likely to encounter difficulties in returning to employment. Yohalen describes those who participate in exiting studies as more likely to secure employment after some mediation with the labour market and become deemed as successful. For women returners and women retrainers there are unique and different issues and problems and pathways. The longer the break from the workforce the greater the problems encountered in returning to work. (page 41) Yohalen's work is particularly significant and useful as it reinforces the concept of different groups within the term "returners". The work states that at any one time there may be several different groups of women and identifies different entry progressions.

An important conclusion is the need to gain information about returners and retraining women as this has direct relevance to the different strategies and may determine services.

Yohalen identified factors that make return more difficult and are still relevant today. These are summarized below:

- Factors that cause women to lose skills because they lack necessary vocational experience.
- Factors based in economic and technological development which lead to change or lack of demand for former qualifications and activities so that women can no longer meet the requirements of the market without retraining
- Factors which, with increasing duration of absence from employment, lead to strong psychological remoteness and alienation from the working world which must be prevented or overcome by suitable measures
- Factors and burdens lying in the personal and family spheres, be they children or family members (Yohalen, 1980, page 41)

3.7 Issues in the Vocational Education Sector for Women

A major theme throughout the research is the lack of appropriateness of the VET system to the needs of women users. The Vocational Education and Training discussion paper (2004) summarises key issues in describing the engagement of women during their life cycle in vocational education. In summary the discussion paper raises such points as

- the **quality of advice and information** about pathways into training is inconsistent and women have expressed a need for individual, customized advice and information.
- the **recognition of prior learning** is a crucial element of the VET system which is often very expensive, cumbersome and not well understood or publicized by VET. Overall the uptake of RPL by women is very low.
- the **need for work placements** for women and **taster courses** for older women re entering are important.
- the **structure and timing of training** in vocational education is described as inflexible and inappropriate for women. This includes the ability to mix components from different training packages.
- **access to on the job training** for women to support their skill development and also enable them to gain transferable qualifications is unavailable or non existent for most courses.
- **support** services such as child care, entry advice and course selection and career guidance are services that should be integral to the operations of most campuses however access to such services varies considerable between states and campuses. (NCVER, 2004)

The review identified that TAFE colleges do not undertake research into women's training needs. There are no profiles or data available on women's preferences, levels of satisfaction and learning styles. Their work points out that women are not seen as a user group and this inevitably results in limited accountability and pressure upon the system not adjusting services for different ages, profiles and user groups of women in the vocational sector. Warner and Smith, Mishra & Dobson (2000)

Reflection of occupational segregation. A significant reflection of the response to women in vocational training is the context of vocational delivery. Throughout readings the VET workforce is described as reflecting occupational segregation present in many industries with

most women being in part time and casual positions. Additionally statistics indicated that gender segmentation of the workforce is also strongly reflected in the training.

Lack of access to relevant advice and information. Work by Dickie and Finnegan (2003) state that women are not well informed about the range of learning that VET offers, describing VET as having poorly articulated pathways. A major limitation of the present system is the high number of women participating in entry level training which research indicates is not a selection pool for employers. Work placements are not available in most courses; especially those selected by women. Researchers highlight that often information is not provided at key decision making points and what advice and information is available is often inadequate and inaccurate. In the work of Dickie and Finnegan it is recommended that women receive information at “critical points” or “decision making points”. To apply this recommendation to women returners it is of critical importance to understand just what these terms mean in respect to women returning to work. It is suggested further research needs to occur to investigate the impact such considerations would have upon the vocational sector, if practically applied.

Limited awareness of the range of courses to be selected. Work of Dickie and Finnegan identified that there has been little change in the distribution of women across the fields of study and the way women select courses in vocational education. Women are described as selecting courses based on the type of life an occupation can offer and most importantly, how it may fit around their family needs or work life balance.

3.8 Women’s Life Cycles and Careers

Women’s career paths have only existed recently. According to Still (2001) it has only been in the last 30 years that women have been able to develop careers; prior to this they have largely been thought of as working for “pin money”, until they married or were required to earn money due to circumstances through death or divorce. Women were also expected to retire as soon as their financial needs were met. The work identifies that the concept of career has grown and women are now seen to be pursuing a career, however this concept is largely based upon unsuited traditional male career models.

Linear models of career paths and limited recognition of women’s lifes cycles. The review identified that a much broader approach needs to be taken to women careers than classic models. Levison (1996), Pringle (1996) and Pringle and Dixon (2001). Consideration of the interaction of multiple factors including parenthood, elder care, family responsibilities, household chores and career stages of partner upon a women’s life cycle easily identifies impact. Research recognizes the nature of women’s multifaceted lives and while no model of women’s career exists it leads towards the recognition that many career models adopted in the past, convey women’s paths as linear along some sort of continuum.

Tendency for women to be portrayed as one homogenous group. The work of Still and Timms (1997) concludes that homogenous models of women’s career development or career paths were problematic; women followed different paths according to their stage of life, the interaction of age, education and desire for a balanced family and work life and type of occupation/industry. Career age is important not relative age. Structural economic changes are also impacting on the validity of traditional career models. Still (2001) emphasizes that career is a series of life experiences and it is career age that counts not chronological age –skills, learning, transitions and identity. In the workforce of today people require new competencies to progress in careers. Individuals need to develop self-knowledge and adaptability. Work by Hall and Richter (1990) describes how the future career paths of employees will be different with different roles and

types of functional work with most without promotional prospects, simply lateral moves across rather than vertical progression.

3.9 Benefits of Career Guidance

Access to good quality career guidance is important. Government has in the past recognized that career guidance provides economic and social benefits and hence access to career guidance is thought to have a direct benefit to unemployment. A flow on effect is attributed towards increasing the efficiency of the search by:

- Reducing the time and delay involved in the return process and thereby filling vacancies more quickly.
- Restimulating discouraged workers
- Addressing the mismatch affects the unemployed by improving the alignment between industries and occupations and actual patterns of labour supply.

(Watts, Law, Killen Kidd, Hawthorne .1996. page 82.)

Recognition of different needs from services to men. Readings indicate that career guidance services are significant for women however there remains varied opinions as to the whether services should develop and enhance women's notions of gender roles and non traditional areas of the workforce. Women have very different priorities depending upon their career decisions with respect to integrating work and family, they view success differently. (1996), Walker (2003), Still (2001) In contrast Sullivan (1999) states careers as no longer relevant and that this field is in a state of flux with many practices and mindsets no longer being relevant as globalization and other factors come into play in the future.

Non traditional areas of work. More recently there has been acceptance that redirecting women into non traditional areas has only achieved limited success as women quite often did not remain in these fields and faced cultural difficulties that could not be overcome. Sultana, 1990, Dickie and Finnegan (2003) contribute to some of the different arguments around why this has occurred ranging from stereotyping to resistance due to sexual identity. More recently researchers argue to move the discussion to primary schools before sex role stereotyping occurs while broadening the approach to include domestic roles and child rearing. A major area of agreement is that programmes should avoid forcing women into areas detached and without support of other women, instead the focus needs to be to develop student's understanding of why their choices are so limited and the career needs of today's workers. All agree an essential element is to better inform and encourage women to choose their position.

3.10 Career Development

Patton and Mc Mahon's (1997) work argues strongly that women's career behaviour has changed and more work needs to be done to identify this change. They also identify that meaningful work is more important to women's lives and acknowledge that there are several factors which operate internally and externally to facilitate or inhibit women's career behaviour.

The participation of women in the labour force and the limitations women face in relation to career development are often discussed and concluded that many factors ranging from discrimination to processes associated with gender socialisation, contributed to gender patterns of education and occupational choices. Patton and Mc Mahon (1997) argue that despite the growth in the field of career development there has been limited change to women's career development. This area could be further researched.

4 Methodology and Approach

4.1 Methodology

The project addressed the following areas;

- i. How do women talk about their aspirations for paid employment?
- ii. How do they see education and training contributing to their plans?
- iii. What is their experience?
- iv. What policy directions and programs would best support them, in the inner linking areas of education and training for work and paid employment?

The research methodology for this project includes

- Conduct literature search to identify issues, trends and best practice.
- Distribute promotional material and invite opportunities to distribute surveys and raise awareness of the project to regional and metropolitan areas.
- Undertake the 4 focus groups target number of 64.
- Electronic copy and hardcopy distribution of survey via TAFE networks and ACE based groups which include student associations and specific target groups such as industry based forums. Compile and analyse when final data is received.
- Review and write up of data and report.

4.2 Approach

The data collection formed a cascading model. The literature search provided the current environment in which return to work and retraining women are provided for by government and vocational sector policy. It also identified key issues and trends in relation to vocational provision for women, lifelong learning, career guidance and career information. Focus groups assisted to dispel or confirm themes and issues in the literature search. The combination of focus groups and literature search then assisted in the development of the survey. A total of 62 women participated in the focus groups and interviews and 192 in the survey.

The research aimed to identify if all women had progressed down the “preparatory step” mode of gaining confidence and building self esteem or if return to work was generated by the motivation to gain skills, seek employment or attain a qualification.

Another aspect of this research was what influenced women’s decisions to return to work or study and on what basis were such decisions made to venture down one path or career versus another. There were specific questions to identify how participants perceive education and training contributes to their future plans and what their experiences are in this regard. The focus groups, survey and interviews also included what information they had accessed and the best kind of supports for women to inter link areas of training and education.

The participants were invited to attend small focus groups. In response to a call for interest using advertising and promotion via women’s networks we were fortunate to have broader training and community groups who responded or invited us to conduct focus group discussions.

The focus groups involved women from different backgrounds and represented a cross section of community; women currently in training, both community based and vocational, women in the workforce and women who had been successful in achieving employment (having completed studies) and women who had not yet ventured back into formalised training. (Yohansen,1980)

A series of interviews was also conducted with individuals that were taped and the others were conducted via phone. The focus groups enabled us to seek difference between the women who participated and give some indication if the needs of individuals varied or not?

Following the collection and analysis of the survey and focus groups a review of themes and issues were drawn together and integrated with the literature search to guide findings and policy implications and to draw conclusions.

Survey Response

There were no requirements to identify respondents on the survey. The questionnaire was divided into a series of forty questions which enabled skips, simple tick the box responses and written responses. The layout of the questionnaire covered 7 sections these are;

1. Background data.
2. Education and qualifications –highest and lowest.
3. Present training –currently enrolled. Why, Where and future intention.
4. Employment – current participation, hours worked, type, paid or unpaid, workforce experience and present education and training.
5. Impact of training and education.
6. Career – current occupation or change, type of information accessed and preferred information.
7. Aspirations and recommendations–future paths and relevance of, VET improvements for women and opinions and views of training and education.

The final survey response rate was 192 which included surveys which were sent or completed during focus groups. In light of the very low response rates to most surveys we were pleased with the results and supported provided particularly in WA and via the WAVE National network.

5 Results

5.1 Background data

A total number of 192 responses were received for the survey and these form the profile below.

Section One Personal Details		
Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age		
0- 25 years	17	8.8%
25-35 years	21	10.9%
35-44 years	51	26.4%
45-54 years	61	31.6%
55-64 years	14	7.3%
65+years	2	1.0%
No answer	27	14.0%
Postcode		
Regional	92	60%
Metropolitan	62	40%
No Answer		
Where do you reside?		
ACT	21	11.9%
QLD	3	1.7%
SA	35	19.8%
WA	74	41.8%
VIC	44	24.9%
TAS	0	0.0%
NT	0	0.0%
NSW	1	0.6%
No answer	30	
Where you born in Australia?		
Yes	122	63.5%
No	40	20.8%
No answer	30	15.6%
Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander origin?		
Yes	4	2.1%
No	153	79.7%
No answer	35	18.2%
Main language spoken at home		
English	157	81.8%
Thai	1	0.5%
Laotian	1	0.5%
No answer	33	17.2%
Do you have permanent residence?		
Yes	153	79.7%
No	7	3.6%
No response	32	16.7%
Do you have a disability, impairment or long term condition?		
Yes	40	20.8%

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
No	113	58.9%
No response	39	20.3%
Medical condition	18	* 0.9%
Hearing /deaf	1	0.5%
Mental Illness	11	*5.7%
Physical	3	1.6%
Vision	4	2.0%
Physical and medical	3	1.6%
Mental,physical, vision and hearing	4	*combined2.0%
Learning Difficulty	1	0.5%
Deep Anxiety	1	0.5%
Diabetes	1	0.5%
Pulmonary Fibrosis	3	1.5%

5.2 Qualifications

- **Level of education.** 32.6% of women returners' highest qualification is Year 10, the second highest 15.2% were those who have completed Year 12. A smaller percentage of 11.4% hold Vocational Certificates and 9.8% hold University qualifications. There were 1.1 % of respondents who had completed primary schooling and a further 4.3% who indicated other.
- **Highest qualification.** 2.8% hold a Masters of Journalism or Nursing which is the highest qualification attained, 15.5.% hold a Bachelor of Education with most respondents indicating they hold Certificate level qualifications and one nil. Most qualifications are reflective of the labour market gender segmentation and are indicative of traditional female areas of work. There are 5.6% who have indicated no qualifications and further 16.8 % of women have Year 10 or under.

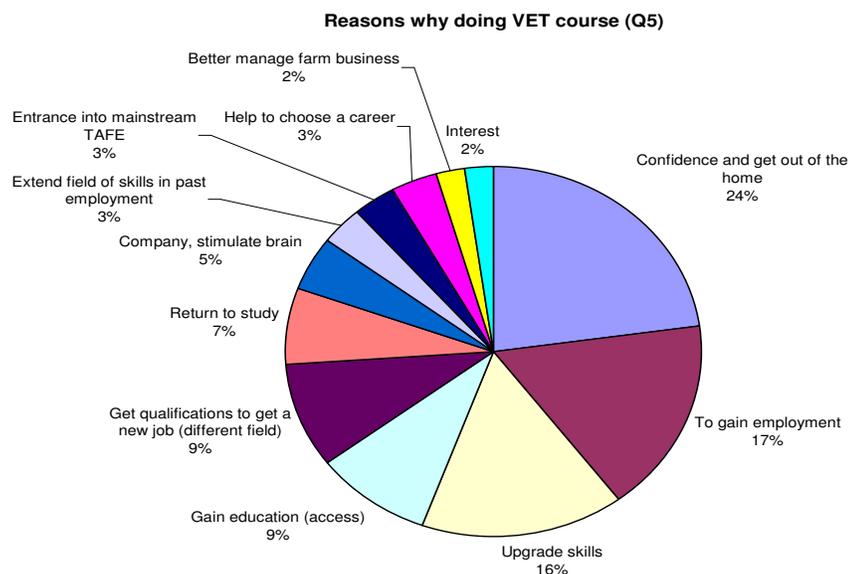
5.3 Training

There are 109 respondents presently involved in vocational education courses around Australia of those 1.8% are involved in Diploma level study, 79.8% are attending some form of women's return to work strategy and a further 10.1% are completing Certificate in General Education with 6.5% studying Certificate level (1-4).

Current Courses

Qualification	Number	Percentage
NOW + Access	87	79.8%
Certificate in General Education Attainment?	11	10.1%
Women's Studies Cert 1,2,4	4	3.7%
Women's Education Cert 1	3	2.8%
Advanced Diploma	2	1.8%
Women's Health	1	0.9%
Women Working Well	1	0.9%

Responses to the reason for undertaking VET training

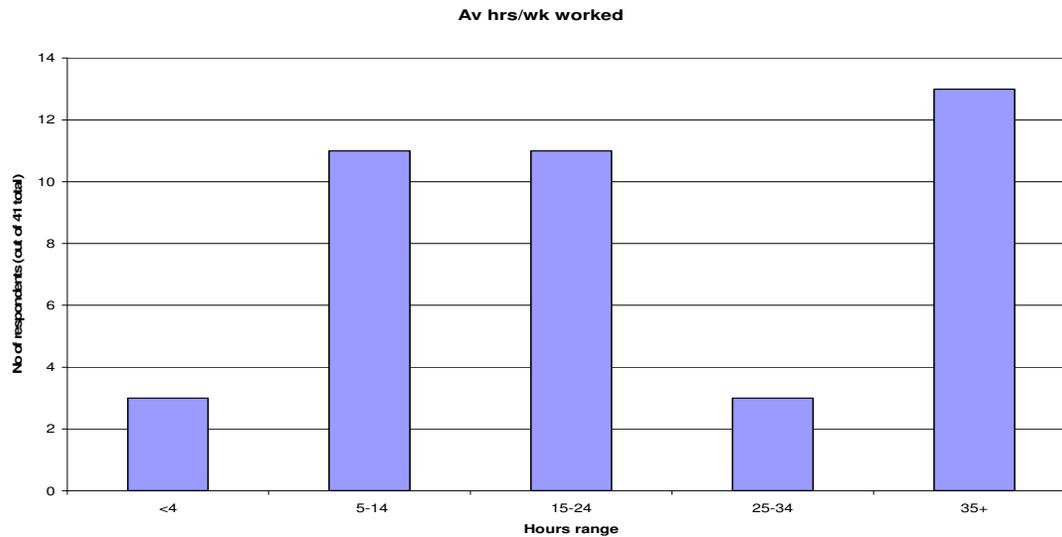


- Reasons for studying.** 31% of women undertake studies for personal development confidence and self esteem, 23% undertake training to up skill or update skills in their current employment or field, 19% undertake study to gain an educational level to access further education, 17% to gain employment. It can be concluded that there are different reasons for women participating in education and training and as well as clearly different reasons for entering vocation education and training. There is also a theme of lifelong learning reflected in the 2% who undertake learning for interest and 24% confidence to get out of home. Women are diverse in their learning and this data clearly reflects women's different learning pathways and career paths along with an interest in re entry and retraining as well as impact in a lifelong learning context.
- Type of Provider.** 59% of the women who participated in the survey were studying in a TAFE college, a further 2% were undertaking study at university and 1% in an ACE setting. It can be assumed that those who gave no answer to this question are not studying.
- Future training.** 48.9% indicated they did intend to undertake training in the future and 9.9% indicated they did not. This confirms that women have high aspirations in relation to their education.

5.4 Employment

Job Title	Number	Percentage
Admin, bookkeeping, clerical, receptionist	10	27.8%
Teacher /lecturer	8	22.2%
Cleaning	4	11.1%
Waitress & kitchen hand	4	11.1%
Manage a business& retail	3	8.3%
Aged care & nursing	2	5.6%
Truck driver	2	5.6%
Coordinator /Quality Prog	2	5.6%
Volunteers	1	2.8%

- **Areas of employment.** The surveyed confirmed that areas of employment reflected the stereotypical sectors associated with women's employment largely service sector; broadly these are secretarial administration, education and hospitality service sector. There was a low response rate to this question. 151 "no answer" to this question. Which does not enable a reflection of the respondents employment areas. Refer to table above.
- **Type of employment.** 21.9% of respondents were in paid employment and 58% were not. Of those in paid employment 5.7% were full time and 7.3% part-time and 6.2% were casual. Over two thirds of respondents were in paid employment. (casual or part-time)



- **Hours worked.** About one third of respondents who are working, are full time and the remaining two thirds are part time.
- **Paid and unpaid work.** Of the 182 respondents; 43.7% respondents indicated that they were in unpaid work, 29.7% were not in unpaid work. Of the 43.7% in unpaid work 25.5% undertook mothering responsibilities, 18.2% were in voluntary work and 2.1% were carers.
- **Working life.** Of the 21.9% of women who were or had been in the workforce the highest amount of years in the work force was 48 years. Several women were currently participating in the workforce. Of those who responded negatively some had not worked, the youngest was aged less than 25 years and the oldest between 54-65 who had not worked since 2003.
- **Work break.** For those who had participated in the workforce the average response was a break of 15 years. The longest length of time out of the workforce for those who had not worked in the workforce was 27 years since 1978.

5.5 Lifelong learning

- **Undertaking Training.** 66.1% of respondents intended undertaking some form of training or education to improve employment prospects and 11.5% did not. Of those who were undertaking education or training 63.1% thought this would change their present situation.
- **Trainings contribution to future plans.** 62.5% of respondents saw training contributing to their future plans while 3.6% did not.

- **Significance of training.** 62.5% rated training and education as “high” significant and 11.9% rated low significance.
- **Impact of Education and Training.** 63.1% indicated that training and education will change their situation and 13.5% indicated that it would not. Responses indicate that women believe education and training will contribute strongly to their plans. This response when combined with the significance of training indicates a strong level of positive support and conveys the high significance of training and education. 148 respondents responded “3+” and above in significance and 65.5 giving a high rating.

5.6 Career

- **Career identified.** Only 39.1% of respondents have decided upon their career with a further 35.9% have not. Of those who had decided upon a career 31.2% had sought information regarding job availability in their careers.
- **Type of career.** Data below reflects the career areas that respondents are pursuing or intending to pursue. Stereo typical service related occupational areas that women are involved in are reflected through out the table 21.6% teaching /lecturing. This high proportion of women in the area of teaching and lecturing reflects regional employment and flexible working hours. Without demeaning these areas they are also not areas of high income levels and reflect the influence of family responsibilities and women’s tendency to look at life style and impact upon family. 5.9% have indicated rural management reflective of the expansion of women’s roles and entrepreneurship across the regional and remote areas.

Type	Number	Percentage
Lecturing /Teaching	11	21.6%
Administration/ Clerical	9	17.6%
Other	9	17.6%
Two or more –different areas	4	7.8%
Rural Bus /Management	3	5.9%
Child Services /Social worker	3	5.9%
Medical, hospital, Natural therapies	3	5.9%
Government Policy admin	2	3.9%
Tourism hospitality	2	3.9%
Counselling	2	3.9%
Communications	1	2.0%
Civil Celebrant	1	2.0%
Real Estate	1	2.0%
VET Nurse	1	2.0%

5.7 Information sought

Information sort. Of the 39% of women who had sought career information only 31% of women did inquire about job availability information before selecting, 34% did not. Of further concern is the fact of the 31.2 % only 14.1 % sought pay rates and salary information. Responses indicated that women did not understand the relevance or significance of this information when selecting or considering a career. This is of concern especially when looking at the number of people who did not access information and clearly indicates a lot needs to be done to better inform and raise women’s awareness of the significance and relevance of such information in making career decisions.

Access to Information A series of questions contained in the survey set out to identify how information or lack of it would impact on career decisions, specifically job availability, pay rates and salary rates. Interestingly women in regional areas indicated that this information is difficult to get and so it was of little relevance basically they take what ever they can and realise that there are not many opportunities. They also indicated that distance of employment and access to childcare impacts upon employment, if these aren't suitable then pay and salary do not impact very significantly.

Relevance of Information to career decision

- *“It is very hard in country area to choose a career, you have to fit into a field available locally. If you have to travel long distances to work then who is looking after the kids?”*
- *“Vague suggestions not sure what I will do”.*
- *“Lack of information causes people to waste time in education areas.”*

Responses have been categorised below, since some responses fell into more than one category results cannot be given in percentage terms.

A total of 66 responded to being asked to indicate if information nor lack of it from the above would impact on their career decision

- i. Responses felt that the information was important and significant to their career decision. (27)
 - ii. Responses indicated the information wasn't important. Essentially you need to work and this information wouldn't change their minds re their career.(28)
 - iii. Responses indicated that in rural areas it is difficult to obtain career information and really one has to accept what opportunities there are locally. (4)
 - iv. Responses indicated that sole parents have difficulty choosing a career between work life balances. (5)
 - v. Responses indicate a group of respondents who have no idea and no career. (4)
- **Types of information considered important:** 20 % wanted what future employment that is available, vacancy areas, statistics on how many jobs are available and where, areas of job growth and related courses. 18.5% wanted pay rates and salary and conditions and a further 9.2% wanted more resources and guides about careers and 7.7% wanted training related options and assistance re fast tracking and course options. Respondents would like to make more informed decisions about their future work.
 - **Information Accessed for current position.** The responses to this question highlighted the need for greater awareness of the relevance, meaning and significance of information, especially as 27% indicated no advice has been accessed, 16.4% indicated TAFE courses, in particular NOW programmes, 12.3 % indicated career centres and advisers including the Centrelink and CRS. The importance of access to current and relevant information is highlighted when reviewing the fact that so many cited the use of TAFE courses and lecturers as sources of assistance. This has implications for PD and the impact courses have upon student decisions and clearly indicates the need for skilled and qualified career services and information
 - **Where and what format of information.** Interestingly this survey confirmed women's preference for face to face information provision and one to one. 27.3%TAFE course ACCESS and NOW, 16.4 career choice, employment service 12.3, experience in work area 9.7%, career resource 6.8%, friend 6.8, trial and error 4.2%, pamphlet 2.8% Data confirms that women have an ad hoc approach and a tendency to find their own.

- **Intend to study for career.** 53.1% indicated they wanted to do more studies in the future and of those who responded “yes “to the question 36.9% indicated TAFE, 10.9% responded university and 15.6% indicate other.

5.8 Aspirations

Responses to how they expected education and training will impact on their future goals can be summarised as follows:

- Career Broadening
- Confidence and Self esteem
- Employability
- A specific job or job outcome
- Skills
- Future viability or sustainability

*no order as some indicated two or three responses

Vocational sector. 43.4% responded very positively to the vocational sector rating the experience as “high” and 33.7 % indicating a positive rating of “4”. Those who rated the experience low did because of the following reasons:

- No experience
- Thought it was for younger people
- No knowledge of courses
- Lack of help CRS
- Lecturers don’t seem to have enough real life experiences-poor advice.

5.9 What supports would you like to see for women in returning to training?

Primarily responses to this question could be grouped into the following categories:

1. **Counselling.** Respondents felt that they lacked necessary career counselling advice and guidance about how best to find the most suitable paths to achieve either employment or education outcomes; this included financial counselling to be able to support fees etc.
2. **Plan.** Development of a plan that was suited to them personally which set career goals based upon individual strengths, weaknesses and needs. * the most mentioned.
3. **Childcare.** Childcare was mentioned many times including after hours childcare and access to childcare services on site or that were preferably close to ensure standards and quality of delivery. Women working and those undertaking training also indicated that access to childcare was important.
4. **Financial.** Many respondents felt that course fees were very high, particularly for university. There were also issues raised with regard to the Pension Education Supplement. The PES was seen as too complicated to understand and did not support students well enough; forcing them to undertake long hours to gain support. This was seen as placing sole parents under stress to study and care for their children. The cost of books, fees, travel and stationary were all indicated as areas where financial support required. Suggestions included supplements and scholarships as ways of supporting women in training, there was a strong indication that women can’t afford to return to study and this is an increasing concern.
5. **Flexibility of course times and content.** Flexible course times were an issue, respondents recommended setting course times within school hours ie. similar to the NOW course (9.30 -2.30), part time courses which reduced the need to extend childcare

- also enables those women who are working part time or casual the opportunity to try to improve their skills via training.
6. **Entry course.** There was general consensus that the Access and NOW programs were very supportive and offered a good model for women who were returning to work or study, many felt that these types of courses should be expanded out to other areas and fields. The use of workshop formats, discussion and extension through exposure and awareness raising of individuals skills and strengths were seen as highly useful as was the use of networking women into local learning networks, forming links within their community and amongst each other as supports.
 7. **Tutoring and support services** - Tutors were mentioned as possible course supports for women who had been away from study for a while or who had second language or literacy issues, as a means of providing direct support.
 8. **Information** –More current and up to date. Improved information in relation possible pathways through to the vocational and education sector, more media advertising and improved information of what is available, where, at what cost and how you can access the different courses through cheaper fees or grants and support. Newsletters were also suggested as a means of keeping return to work women informed and networked.
 9. **Course content.** More hands on, increased on the job training and applied training, with access to mentors for women in male dominated professions. The delivery of talks and information to mothers in school community environments and more workshops to support confidence building and self esteem while bringing women together to share ideas and support. Reduced the length of course time to attain qualifications.

When respondents were asked in less than 50 words describe what changes would you like to suggest to VET training courses to support women in training?

Clearly some responses made in the survey to this question related to the specific course that the women were attending. The following responses are provided below:

- Mother friendly times and dates.
- Childcare and daycare for children with disabilities
- Closer communication with Centrelink and government departments and TAFE's to improve financial support for students.
- Flexibility- times, module materials made more accessible
- HECs to be available for vocational courses
- Learning hours and homework to be negotiated between students and teachers/lecturers
- More hands on approach and work experience to help you learn more
- More social support for women entering training/employment situations
- Financial support
- Courses aimed at individual's previous employment to update their skills
- More publicity about TAFE- information on the courses that are available, how long it takes and how much they cost

When respondents were asked in less than 50 words describe if VET supported their career plans.

37 % of respondents indicated VET does support their career plans and 12% did not, when asked to, describe why they have this view. The following response is provided.

- *Since starting the course I have gained confidence and I am becoming more clear on which path I may follow career wise in the future*

Those who indicated “No” stated the following:

- *It does not address the return to work needs of older, tertiary qualified people with a long work history who is out of work for family reasons.*

There were 17 written responses to this question. There were five responses which indicated that more support, information and direction was required in their vocational courses.

Respondents were asked to indicate in less than 50 words how do you see training and education contributing to your longer term plans.

The responses to this question were very positive, three responses indicated that the respondent was not sure how the education and training would contribute however overall there was a strong positive response.

- *Education is important and I need to be experienced enough to re enter the work force.*
- *Learning gives me knowledge and confidence.*
- *Very important particularly for women. It is the only way to remain competitive.*

6 Focus groups

The focus groups operated through various networks to capture a diverse range of experiences those who were yet to enter formalised training, those who were currently in TAFE or ACE programmes and those who had completed studies or were currently employed. There were four focus groups conducted, two in regional and two in metropolitan areas, a total number of 62 participants took part. The focus groups aimed to test some of the review issues with key focus upon the following:

In returning to work do you intend undertaking training in the vocational sector?

Discussion indicates that the majority of women do not consider vocational sector as an option and tend to look beyond this sector to the Adult Community Sector (ACE) for initial support on to women's networks or university. This view was confirmed for women returning and women retraining as in most instances participants view VET as relevant if you are younger or working in a trade or technical area. Vocational education was viewed as a way of upskilling, if established in your career and needing to gain further qualifications within a specific range of occupations hairdressing and social work. Women returners and women retraining appear not to view TAFE as part of a support towards their initial return to work and study. This view seems to be partially connected to the image they hold of TAFE and partially because of the range and format of courses that TAFE are seen to provide for women. This is captured in the following statement

“It took me a long time to establish confidence to go into TAFE as I didn't have a job and thought it was when you really knew what job you wanted or skills you needed for work”.

“TAFE is a main college and is viewed as a proper provider. You have to get together enough money to make the commitment to pay for a course and then you don't really know what your taking on”

These comments reinforce the need to better promoted and raise women's awareness of the vocational sector and the range of pathways and to improve information and guidance in this area. These comments also reflect a lack of confidence and self esteem in women's re entry .

What is your view or experience in returning to training and work?

All women expressed a lack of confidence, uncertainty and reluctance towards the return to work or re training and this could be linked towards the length of time they had been away from work or study and in some instances the reason for leaving their previous employment. There were consistently one or two individuals in all workshops who had no experience in the workforce and no high school experience or qualifications.

There were distinct groups of women in the focus groups; those who seemed to consider re training or re entry experiences as different and refreshing and those who were unsure of the outcome and feared the consequences and who seemed disappointed and angry about their future.

Many women returners had utilised some form of community based network or support group through local agencies and through meeting other women via children's' school or hobby groups many acknowledge the adult community education area. The ACE field provides an extensive support network for women through community based programmes and it was through this provider that many women networked with other women and were able to source forms of

support and guidance. The ACE field which has continued to cater for a large percentage of women and is viewed positively by most women. Focus group a spoke highly of the format and range of supports this network offers such as work placement, work exposure, mentoring, coaching, networking and a range of options particularly in regard to childcare as it is offered on site or linked to local pre primary, primary schools and play groups. This was seen as a good model for TAFE vocational sector and specific industries to adopt to attract women

Those who had returned as part of up skilling indicated that the length and times of the courses were an inhibiting factor. Some had returned to TAFE after graduating with a university degree as they had not been able to access employment and to gain more self confidence and employability. However the programmes were lengthy and not flexible or supported re employment support at the end of the course.

What career information did they access?

The focus groups indicated that limited information was accessed by many women because it was unavailable, however in their roles as parents many women became better informed and aware while trying to located information for their children's career needs. ACE were major links in accessing information for returners while retraining women indicated that they often found the search for information daunting and confusing. Many expressed the view that information was largely targeting younger people which implied it relevant or appropriate.

Also that information was difficult to access:

Difficult, lack of information, skills and up to date difficulties. I feel like I have been living in isolation as I couldn't source information, was unsure about information no internet if you don't know the programs and how to use the computer.

"Assumption made that you have a computer, know how to use it" Really our computer is basic and we have it for our children's school needs, we can't afford internet and I haven't a clue how to use it"

What career information have they accessed and found useful?

Views varied considerably regarding precourse information. It appears many women are directed toward New Opportunities for Women, Access and Work Preparation courses without appropriate consideration of suitability or an individuals preparedness which refers to both preparedness for work or preparedness for training by way of skills or study. There are few other course options available to women upon return and re entry to select in the college profile and these are often conducted without links to other training, without work placement or taster course components. Women with university degrees are directed to NOW courses when with improved career advice they should access other courses or pathways. This is of concern as it is effectively delaying their return or exposure to key career information.

The research concludes the entry point for women occurs via direction that is not underpinned by quality advice or information. There is no recognition of women within the context of broadening their awareness of their choices and the range of pathways that may be suitable to meet their needs prior to vocational entry. While women expressed a need for individual and customised advice that occurred prior to course selection. There were issues around information re courses and computer access to online career information ser. Women also expressed how restricting this on line policy was as they couldn't source information without computers and computer skills, and reasonable levels of literacy which often they did not have.

6.1 Issues identified through the focus groups for women retraining and returning.

Focus groups identified the following;

- *the limited range of courses that exist and the non existence of recognition of prior learning in the entry process.* There were no entry processes that supported an individuals determination of pathways and provided a range of learning options to them. With limited awareness of what was available or new areas of growth they relied upon their network or contact with other women however informed or ill informed that was. Participants indicated more effort could be focused toward a process designed around the needs of the individual women; based upon her awareness of training and work options this is something that they must effectively seek out themselves. A potential training plan or pathway is not initiated or mapped out for consideration and review.
- *that many younger women lacked adequate literacy and numeracy skills to enable them to reach their potential educationally or in their return to work.* This is of major concern as these basic competencies are necessary for lifelong learning and participation in today's society are often inhibiting women; return and informed participation.
- *women continued to display lack of confidence and self esteem which are complex issues that are not realised and overcome within one course.* Confidence levels were generally very low yet were being directed to work.
- *lack of redirection into opportunities for up-skilling or skill enhancement and tendency to reinforce occupational segmentation via current courses*

7 Discussion

7.1 *Themes, issues and integrating literature*

Introduction

There are several issues that the research project identified that are critical and require immediate attention to assist in the improvement of outcomes for women returners and retrainers. The following discussion identified the value women give to education and training seeing it as an opportunity for personal, social and economic growth. The work draws attention to sector policy issues and the need for more research to identify the impact of such shifts with regard to availability of courses and pathways for women in VET. Reference is also made of the lack of recognition of the career life cycle that women progress through and lack of action by VET to embrace this and view it as a way of progressing women's engagement. The research draws attention to access to career advice and information and how this impacts upon how women select courses, progress and participate in the sector. The work concludes that most women are limited in their vision of where their training may lead them apart from immediate anticipated personal development or employment and as such they don't think of the information they need to identify the most suitable career pathway. It is evident from the research that women returners rely too heavily upon the process of training and education re entry as a mechanism of assisting them to become informed. Finally the importance of access to current and relevant information is highlighted.

7.2 *Lifelong learning*

7.3 *The significance of lifelong learning and economic benefits.*

This research confirms that as a group women value learning. 65% of respondents rated education and training as of high significance and related potential gains and benefits personally, socially and economically. Women had a range of views on the impact of training upon their present situation in this way education was seen to have a both a short term immediate impact and a longer term difference to their quality of life. The research can confirm that women who take up training or education reflect a strong sense of interest in lifelong learning and do so for a range of reasons skills, educational attainment and employment. Women are also driven to study for personal growth, as part of stimulating their creativity and also respite as a carer etc.

It is interesting that women in older age brackets expressed an interest and activity in education with women 60-65+ indicating an enthusiasm for vocational learning. The responses convey and confirm women's awareness of social and economic benefits that education provides for women in both the short and longer term. Overall this research project suggests that for women education and training contributes strongly to their plans and they have a very positive opinion toward the significance of training and education. However education and training sectors need to develop a broad range of learning programmes and strategies that recognise the need for life long learning in particular for women that is responsive and in tune with career paths and life cycles of women.

7.4 *The significance of literacy and numeracy*

The matter of literacy and numeracy concerns were raised or identified throughout the research. Focus groups and comments identified learning issues that restrict some of the retraining and return to work women's progress. Given the numerous older women that participated in this research, the work can draw on research of Connole, where an indication of potential literacy issues for older women can be seen by research where women over 40 years of age make up

14.7% of literacy classes. This research project indicates that literacy and numeracy were both raised as issues for women returners and trainers. The low educational levels also indicate potential issues in this area with this research identifying 1.1% no primary schooling and 31% to Year 10 high school. There is a chance that many returners in the 40- 54 age group will require access to numeracy and literacy support of some kind.

7.5 Economic significance for women of training and employment.

The importance of training for women in relation to economic sustainability cannot be conclusive as qualifications alone do not necessarily lead to greater self sufficiency or economic independence. The research found that women were completing education and training but were still experiencing difficulty accessing the employment market or employment. Discussion highlighted the attainment of qualifications that were not significant or relevant to employment or valued by employers. NCVET, Women in VET 2000 indicate that female graduates achieve poorer employment outcomes than their male counterparts. In 2001, 70% of female graduates were employed compared to 77% of males. In 1998 female graduates achieved 68% a comparison of the male graduate outcomes. The research can confirm that qualifications alone do not ensure employability or economic advantage.

7.6 VET Policy and framework

Impact in the shift of vocational education policy. There is no longer a social policy that requires VET to achieve equal access and opportunity for all. As a consequence of VET policy shifted toward women as an identified equity group in 2003 and there have been numerous changes to service delivery, data collection and resource allocations since. The review suggests a shift in philosophy and approach towards supporting women's participation in VET. The responses in the survey and during focus groups indicate that women are often not aware of TAFE as a training or education option. The review identified that under the shift in focus TAFE was required to adopt strategies these included specific marketing to women and designing courses to take into account women's working lives and life cycles. This research cannot confirm that this has occurred and recommends further research should be undertaken in this area to investigate if there has been a reduction of programmes and to identify if recommendations aimed at maintaining women's participation and training service have been undertaken.

VET policy for a diverse range of women. This research confirms the work of Connole (1997) who stated that women want to participate in vocational education and training for many different reasons to return to work, to retraining and up grade their skills. Reasons may vary from improving their chances of employment, to upgrading current qualifications, meeting personal and social goals as part of their long term career plans, and gaining educational qualifications for earlier educational disadvantage. For the most part vocational education appears to provide a large amount of courses at entry level for women with limited articulation beyond into new technologies or learning pathways above certificate level. There is limited evidence of women specific strategies in structure of programmes, formats and modes of delivery of training. There Connole also highlights that women are not content to be second best

They want to be acknowledged as legitimate clients of the training system, whose needs are considered equal in terms of VET access. This means a system which treats women, in all their diversity, as central and not add ons. This means ceasing to design training arrangements for young men and making unsatisfactory running repairs to the system to accommodate women and other equity groups. (Connole, 1997, section 3, p1)

7.7 Women faced different barriers in their access to education and training.

The research confirms the same findings in relation to key issues as identified in The Vocational Education and Training discussion paper (2004). The paper stated 5 key areas where the sector had failed to address the engagement of women in vocational education. These areas have been clearly identified throughout the research as lacking in development, they are as follows:

- provision of quality of advice and information about pathways into training for women.
- recognition of prior learning that is not expensive or cumbersome and is well understood or publicized by VET.
- the inclusion of training where appropriate that includes work placements and work exposure for women and taster courses for older women re entering.
- the provision of a structure and offer training that is appropriately timed in vocational education that is also flexible and appropriate for women that considers their career and life cycles
- the inclusion of access to on the job training for women to support their skill development and transfer.
- the establishment of support services such as childcare, entry advice and course selection and career guidance services as part of regular operations

The research confirmed that women experience barriers which reduce their ability to participate in training or retraining such as family constraints, financial limitations and work commitments. There were clear indications in the survey of issues around numeracy and literacy, regional women, women with disabilities and older women. There is also clearly implications with respect to the participation of indigenous women and CALD indicated in the lack of participation in the survey. The vocational sector needs to consider this in the design and construction of programmes and services.

Women have limited time to access training and education. The research identified that to provide services for retraining the matter of access to VET courses is an issue. The matter of time was raised relating to the length of courses, timing of courses, ability to fit education or training into their busy schedule, the need for greater flexibility and opportunity to select courses or specific skills knowledge or expertise as required. The research can confirm that many women had difficulty in creating the time to obtain information, access services and participate in training. The amount of hours worked was 35+ (6.8%), most worked between 25 -34 hours (16%) and 5.7% worked between 15 -24 hours, 5.7% worked 5 -14 hours and 1.5% worked less than 4 hours. These statistics highlight the return to study group of older women and issues of work life balance that women juggle with, let alone the issues of time to access course based training and education. The vocational sector needs to consider the implications of time in the construction of programmes such as delivery during school hours, shorter courses, workplace training and on the job models

7.8 Significant unpaid time spent in unpaid work.

The survey captured responses to unpaid work with 43.7% respondents indicating that they were in unpaid work. This unpaid work is significant when considering the range of skills women obtain informally and the need to enable recognition of these skills without fees, expense or time of formal arrangements. This research confirms women are not necessarily returning to work or education without having continued their learning and development through voluntary work. Yet the education and training systems still resist recognition of the acquisition of such skills either in the process of an individual's entry or through recognition of prior learning services despite such RPL processes being formally in place. The vocational sector needs to raise women's

awareness of the existence of this process and investigate streamlining procedures and processes to encourage women users.

7.9 Career information and services

Ad hoc career guidance

Many researchers agreed that women career guidance and development are offered to women on an ad hoc basis or for the most part not at all and certainly not in the format preferred by women. This is confirmed by this research project. 27% indicated “no advice” has been accessed, which is of concern as the decision to return to study and select courses should be made from an informed basis. The research confirmed that women do not know where and how to locate career based information and there were also several issues around access to relevant, appropriate and current information, particularly for regionally based women. The research suggests that women are not aware of the type of questions they need to ask and information that is useful to guide their decision making and occupational choice or training. Evident in the research was the fact women had selected occupations based on their perceptions of ability to work around the needs of family, without considering longer term potential and economic benefits.

7.10 Quality of advice provided to women in particular in VET.

It is evident from the research that women returners rely too heavily upon the process of training and education as a mechanism of assisting them to become informed about employment and careers. They rely heavily upon incidental opportunities that may arise between Centrelink, CSR or the TAFE system to assist them and through trial and error make decisions for their future career directions.

The research project confirms that access to career education is thought to have a direct benefit to unemployment specifically increasing the efficiency of the search and encouraging people to consider opportunities and address mismatch. This research suggests that through access to better timed and appropriate career counselling there would be a reduction in the time taken to secure employment and improved selection of training pathways and options. This is of particular relevance to entry training for women, as comments indicated they are often confused and not well informed or linked to networks through which to access information. There were also instances where women had been inappropriately directed to transition courses when their qualifications and experience should have enabled them to be fast tracked to upskilling or a retraining programme. It is the view of this research that if women had access to quality based advisers, that efficiencies would have been achieved.

Focus groups and surveys indicate that many returners and retraining women were not empowered nor prepared for employment conditions or work based practices. Their level of new and emerging occupations, new technology and innovations, the conditions of the labour market, negotiation skill for contracts, expectations relating to family friendly work practices and legal rights and responsibilities were not known. This is an area that needs to be addressed as part of short courses and workshops and part of return to work programmes.

7.11 Value of current women's entry courses

Significance and value of women's preparation and access programs. This research can conclude a ‘high value’ was indicated by all women of all backgrounds for these women's entry programmes. That the fact this entry program has been constructed over time for women, to suit women's needs, is part of the reason why it is so highly valued. This is an indicator and possible framework for women learners' forms of longer term training and education delivery, the model

needs to be transferred across to other non traditional areas. Entry courses can lead on to vocational education as many women did not know what TAFE offered or provided until they had started the NOW, JET or Access courses.

7.12 Women's awareness of vocational education.

Women's awareness of vocational education and education as valid training strategy for them is in part hindered by their own perceptions that it is for younger people. This research can confirm that women require greater awareness of vocational education as a suitable, valued and meaningful training and education option. VET needs to improve its provision through the structure and approaches it adopts in service provision

The VET sector has to prove itself to be relevant, worthwhile and engaging. It must demonstrate that it's programs lead to rewarding work opportunities and careers. ...ways of suggesting pathways to personal advancement that include multiple pathways and expanding the horizons and possibilities for women and not just young men and women. (NCVER, 2002)

8 Policy implications for Women Return to Work

The following directions have been formulated through a literature search, focus group information and analysis of survey findings. Areas included key policy direction and implications changes. This includes to VET, to TAFE and vocational service providers in the construction of training strategies and improved provision of career information and career services, that

Government to improve the relevance and suitability of the VET sector for women returning and retraining through the following :

1. Reviewing the suitability of the new proposed VET governance and accountability framework to ensure new features proposed are more flexible and responsive to the needs of women.
2. The adoption of a combined policy approach that utilises diversity and targeted approaches to improve the provision of services and strategies for women returners.
3. Ensure women have a ‘voice’ in the new proposed VET system through the representation on proposed action groups, engagement in leading women’s organisations and peak bodies to have input into peak bodies and to address critical issues in the training system such as women returning to work to ensure system accountability, effectiveness and responsiveness

The vocational training systems to develop more appropriate and relevant delivery for women re turners and re trainers through the following:

1. Promote the priority of more flexible (time, mode and content) training qualifications that can be developed to meet the needs of women preparing for return to work and those returning to study.
2. Improve the provision and the relevance of information about vocational education and employment to women returners.
3. More appropriately market the vocational sector to target women returners and older women.
4. Develop and improve access to appropriate counselling and student support services across the vocational sector.
5. Access to good quality childcare and after school care are significant issues for women in their return to work and return to learn.
6. A need to expand the range of financial supports provided to women and to keep such costs from being inhibitive.
7. Improve the quality of career breaks for women returners by increasing the range of courses and access to flexible formats for training and support.
8. Make available more hands on and practically orientated courses, such as taster and refresher courses.

9. Increase the provision of work placement and work experience in courses for women returners and older women to better prepared them for the workforce and new occupations.
10. Increase the provision and access to the recognition of prior learning so women have more options to have employability skills assessed without needing to attend courses and existing skills recognised that have been gained while at home through other work.
11. Construct workshops and courses that increase awareness of and knowledge of women returners in new and emerging technologies and new developments (skill formation and occupational areas)
12. Improve and increase the quality of and accessibility of career advice and information.
13. Investigate the opportunity for career break arrangements through the vocational system within a wider range of occupational areas and professions.
14. Improve the availability of services in regional areas, increase the level of flexible options available to women in regional areas.

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10 Appendices

Case study 1. Case Study of Sole Parent undertaking full time study to re-enter the Workforce

“I ended up living in an emergency housing situation - I had been with a partner for seven years and ended holding a baby at the age of 22. I had no furniture, I had no family support or anything and over the years I slowly built up but it was very, very hard. I remember thinking to myself there must be places out there that could help me, or there must be an easier way but it was really, really hard. And when my son reached pre-school age I was able to buy a \$300.00 car it wasn't flash but it was able to get us around. And that was the beginning of me being able to get out there and do something with my life.

You know people would say or think why don't sole parents just go out to work and that was fine but I would be walking my son to the nearest childcare service which would take me 40 minutes then I would be getting on the bus going to work and then doing it all in reverse by the time I got home by the time I finished I would get home around 7.30pm I may as well as not have had my son.

I found out about JET by asking at Centrelink when I returned my form one day. I asked at the counter for what I wanted to do and they made an appointment with a lady who happened to be a JET advisor. I had not seen any brochures or anything advertised it was just because I happened to ask the right person. The JET advisor was absolutely fantastic and wonderful and just encouraged me. She had known other women who had studied before. It is such a shame that this service is not longer available in Kwinana.

It was through JET that they had assistance for sole parents and I applied because I wanted to work in the welfare industry and helping others. Human Services which later changed to Community Services was the path I wanted to go on and I studied over three years. I studied and completed the Certificate III, Certificate IV and the Diploma. My practical work for TAFE required that I did on the job training and from doing that I met a couple that helped and assisted me with childcare for my son which was really great. Because of their help I could actually do a little bit of work at my practical placement whilst I was studying and whilst I was on the job training I was able to apply what I was learning at TAFE. I was able to use that to get myself into the farm because at that stage they didn't have any welfare workers just psychologists working with their clients and there was a big gap. So I was able to prove myself with what I knew and help the residents into doing quite a lot and created my own position after a while. I was the first student they ever employed. I am working with professionals they all have university degrees, doctorates etc and I have kept this job for seven years.

There were times when I did overnight at the farm and I was in tears as I just didn't know how I was going to get through it all but I just persevered and it was just the perseverance and if you want to help yourself others will want to help you to. I was overwhelmed because I thought I had taken on too much, I was tired I was running around, I got burn out but I had to just keep focused on the future and what I could achieve, how things could change and what was at the end of it all. At the same time I had to put restraining orders on my partner (each year for seven years) and that really wears you down.

The lecturers at TAFE were really encouraging and thankfully a couple that I met helped me with my son and people at work that were willing to help and support me. There were times when my son was sick and they would let me go home or if he had something important on at school and they were supportive in that so my working environment was very supportive as well.

If I had not found the couple and their assistance I would not have been able to do what I did. She had been a sole parent herself and had got married but knew how hard it was. They lived close and although we did not have a friendship our paths crossed and we are still friends today.

Childcare whilst I was studying was horrendous – When he was in Pre-primary because that is fulltime I booked him into after school care which he just hated but it was the only way and that was how we got through. You need support and you need someone to assist you there is no way I could have done it without the help of the couple I met.

I wanted to work in welfare as I knew how hard it was to live like that as that was my own situation as a sole parent and I was finding out things through my studies and I wished I had known previously it would had made my life a lot easier. And tapping into all the networks and what was available to people that no-one really knows about or tells you. The co-ordination of these services is very shocking. It is OK if you have a telephone and can afford to make

50 calls to find out something but you just can't do that. You are very isolated especially if you don't have your own transport.

The study hours were not flexible – I had three days were I had to be on Campus studying full time 9am – 3pm.

After school care was subsided and was the only way as it helped out alot with the child support via sole parent pension. It would have been good if the study was available on line or flexible or if we could study as external students. If I had not had transport or had been more isolated than what I was there is no way I would have been able to do what I did.

With our practical placements I was really, really lucky as at the farm they allowed me to arrange training hours around my sons school hours. But I guess not many employment agencies are like that and I guess because it is a humanitarian field they are a bit different. I chose the farm for my practical placement because it was close to where I was living. Now I am the farm dinosaur and I have been the longest here and the new ones don't know my personal history.

Financially it is totally devastating and really hard to study although I received Ausstudy towards books they are more expensive and you still needed to buy materials and buy petrol to get to places etc. I couldn't afford a computer or have internet access I had to go to friends or stay back in class and this made things extremely difficult and a lot harder than they need to be. It is a requirement that work at TAFE handed in is this format and without support it makes things unnecessarily harder. It would have been good if I could have lent a computer. The same with clothing we had to make sure we looked decent for practical placements.

The other two days I had off you would need to go to the library, find resources and materials and I just could not have done it without a car. It was a really difficult time financially and commitment wise. There were a few other sole parents on the course but they dropped out as it was just too difficult.