



AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION
SUBMISSION TO THE
GENERAL EQUITY SUB GROUP

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Pat Byrne
Federal President

Susan Hopgood
Federal Secretary

Australian Education Union
Ground Floor
120 Clarendon Street
Southbank VIC 3006

Telephone: 61 3 9693 1800
Facsimile: 61 3 9693 1805
E-mail: aeu@aeufederal.org.au

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1. Background

- 1.1 The Australian Education Union is an Industrial and Professional organisation representing approximately 165, 000 members nationally. Membership of the AEU includes teachers and educators working in TAFE, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and educators. We welcome the opportunity to submit our thoughts on National Indigenous Advisory structures for the VET system to the Client and Student Voice Action Group, through its Indigenous sub-group.
- 1.2 This paper may address some key questions as outlined in the discussion paper, but will also address issues, which have not been canvassed in the questions. The paper will predominantly focus on women and young girls, as students and employees of the VET system.

2. Issues not canvassed in the Consultation Paper's Questions

2.1 Principles of Inequity.

- 2.1.1 The most recent report on equity in VET by NCVER, (Considine et al, 2005) argues that that the *individual characteristics* viewpoint used in developing policies to address disadvantage has acknowledged that Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people, women, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, people with (dis)abilities and people in rural and remote communities have been consistently under-represented in the VET system. However, looking further at disadvantage, the report further explains that within those groups it can be seen, (for young people in particular) that for those who systematically miss out on VET that structural barriers also stand in their way. Since the late 1990s those identified were those still living at home, those from single-parent families, and those from families with a history of parental unemployment. Mature aged people are also emerging as a group finding difficulties with access as well as outcomes from the VET system – particularly mature aged women.
- 2.1.2 The AEU would like to see DEST understand and approach equity and disadvantage holistically, acknowledging that many identified as “equity client groups” face multiple disadvantages. The AEU also stresses the need to address equity in VET access and outcomes through a *social outcomes* agenda (alongside the industry driven *economics outcome* agenda) which places value on the community development, social inclusion, and social justice purposes of VET. (Considine, 2005, p6)
- 2.1.3 Acknowledging the approach NCVER takes to identifying disadvantaged groups, as it encompasses the full range of individuals, the AEU wishes DEST to maintain its commitment to addressing women in VET. Women are and always have been members of all equity groups, though indeed where women are represented within other equity groups, their disadvantage is clearly compounded. This should not be lost through DEST's processes for student consultation.

2.1.4 An example of women's ongoing disadvantage in VET the AEU draws DEST's attention to the following findings from the 2004 NCVER Equity in VET report (Bowman). Regarding women's choices and participation It found that:

- Women are less likely to be employed upon completion of their course or subjects, (with a 7% lower employment rate than male graduates are).
- Overall less women are participating in apprenticeships and traineeships than males, though their numbers are growing faster. However, it was cited that due to ongoing discrimination and male dominated work cultures, women are less likely to undertake apprenticeships be in non-traditional (male dominated) fields, in favour of intermediate clerical, sales and services (62%); elementary clerical, sales and services (11.1%); and trades (8.7%).
- Poor pathways linking work placement opportunities, Adult and Community Education and VET were highlighted as contributing to difficulties for women, particularly women seeking re-entry into the workforce, whom have low esteem or bad previous training experiences.
- Recent Pay Equity/Parity inquiries and cases across the country (QLD, NSW, WA and VIC) have consistently shown that those work areas dominated by women, or considered 'soft' skills, are still valued and hence paid less than male work of equal value. Figures vary, but on average women's earnings are still almost 20% less than men's, or around \$200 per week less, depending on sector (private or public) and employment mode. This affects women's 'purchasing power' to undertake VET qualifications.
- Women's access to the VET system is also impacted by their employment mode, if employed. The reality of the casualisation trend in Australia's is that women make up just 34% of the full time employed workforce, in female dominated industries casual (precarious) employment modes are higher. NCVER, (Bowman et al, 2004) reported that only a quarter of employers providing structured training for their workforce, did so for non-permanent (casual) employees. In addition, where training is offered to women, the inflexibility of these training times often prohibits women's participation in skill development due to caring responsibilities.

Recommendation 1.

The AEU recommends DEST takes into account women, as a whole group, when considering the structure of its student client "general equity" advisory structures. The AEU also notes, for future consideration that NCVER, (Bowman et al, 2004) actually argued in 2004 that women's experience is underrepresented on industry advisory bodies and that such advice requires a better linking of employment trends and opportunities for women in VET offerings.

2.2 Client and Student Voice

2.2.1 The AEU believes that the terms ‘client’ and ‘student’ are used homogeneously in the paper, when they are not the same thing. Students are not necessarily clients of the system, and clients are not necessarily students. Further, the title of the paper refers to the development of a ‘client and student voice’ in the system, which serves to exclude a range of important stakeholders who are neither ‘clients’ nor ‘students’. Teachers and educators working in the VET system would fit in to this category, as would potential students who have not been ensured access to TAFE colleges around Australia. Neither group would be considered ‘clients’ or ‘students’ of the system, yet both have a strong role to play as stakeholders in VET.

2.2.2 The title is the antithesis to the 6 national priorities for action, which attempt to articulate a holistic vision for Indigenous VET.

Recommendation 2.

The AEU recommends that any title developed for any new advisory mechanism in Indigenous VET is broad enough to include all stakeholders. Recommendation 1

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3. Issues Discussed in Consultation Paper

3.1 Principles for National advisory arrangement

1. Industry and business needs both now and for the future, drive training policy, priorities and delivery;
2. Better quality training and outcomes for clients through more flexible and accelerated pathways, are assured;
3. Processes are simplified and streamlined and enhance national consistency;
4. Young people have opportunities to gain a wide range of lasting skills that provide a strong foundation for their working lives; and
5. Training opportunities are expanded in areas of current and expected skill shortage.

Scope; activities; linkages and operation of the new national client advisory arrangement

2. The new advisory arrangement should:
 - a. Have a clearly defined scope of activity;
 - b. Adopt an evidence based approach to providing advice;
 - c. Provide advice that is action oriented and leads to tangible training and employment outcomes;
 - d. Be credible with the client group through appropriate, transparent and accountable processes;
 - e. Be well connected to the national training system with the capacity to influence training planning and delivery;
 - f. Recognise and be responsive to other initiatives impacting on the national training system; and
 - g. Be innovative and flexible.

3.1.1 The AEU notices that one of the 5 principles for the national advisory arrangement specifies that, “young people have opportunities to gain a wide range of lasting skills that provide a strong foundation for their working lives”. Whilst the AEU does not disagree with this principle, it should be recognised that the VET system (ideally) caters for students’ life long learning and has a particularly crucial role in providing a strong foundation for the working opportunities and lives of the mature aged.

3.2 Recognise that much work has already been done and build on our achievements to date.

3.2.1 The AEU is particularly concerned that the outcomes of this inquiry not replicate already existing arrangements, nor discard previous consultations and frameworks/national policy documents already developed and supported by these groups - e.g. Partners in a Learning Culture: The Way Forward, Bridging Pathways and Women Shaping our Future 2004-2010. The AEU believes that his consultation should strengthen the opportunity to develop ways to progress and implement these reports.

3.2.2 State and Territory Ministers agreed in 2003 to use the Women: Shaping our Future (WSOF) supporting framework to ensure its objectives were integrated into annual VET planning and reporting processes. The supporting framework was to “form the basis of the planning, priority setting and resource allocation arrangements to advance the agenda for women nationally.” (ANTA, 2004, p3)

3.2.3 The AEU is disappointed and critical of the fact that DEST has confirmed that WSOF is still **current but to date no action has been carried out to promote it**, (other than women being identified in the Annual VET plan).

Recommendation 3.

The AEU believes Women Shaping Our Future should be resourced and implemented prior to any further consultation by DEST around women’s equity within the VET system.

3.2.4 The AEU wholly supports WSOF as it understood that “women face barriers due to disability, age, gender, cultural difference, language, numeracy, cost, unemployment, imprisonment or isolation and have particular needs, with these varying from person to person. VET needs to better respond to the multiple and diverse needs of women through critical issues such as flexibility of training, family friendly VET provision, accessible pathways from informal to formal learning, responsiveness to different learning styles, access to role models and mentors, learning supports that acknowledge whole of life needs and remove barriers to participation and professional development programs that respect and include casual and part-time workers. (ANTA, 2004, p1)

- 3.2.5 One “key focus” area of the WSOF framework was that VET modeled equity in its employment practice. As the union representing TAFE teachers, the AEU would like to take this opportunity to stress this point.

NCVER has indicated (Bowman, 2004, p31) that the technical and further education (TAFE) workforce is predominantly female (55% of TAFE staff in Australia).

Further, in reporting ABS statistics, it is said that of the TAFE practitioner workforce, 16.4% are full-time employed females, while 32% are part-time working females, (totaling 48.9% of the TAFE workforce, and while part-time work may assist some women with caring responsibilities it is their permanency status which is troubling. Across all states and territories “there was a much greater proportion of males employed permanent full-time than females. Consistent with this, more females than males were employed on a non-permanent, non-full-time basis” 16. (NCVER, 2004, p32)

The VET workforce currently mirrors occupational segregation in many industries. Gender distribution in teaching tends to reflect industry and occupational segregation. The business and community and health fields tend to be the main teaching areas for female teachers. This is mirrored in the labor market, where more women are employed in these occupational groups in total (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003b). In addition, female VET professionals are less likely than their male colleagues to apply for management roles. (Bowman, 2004, p51)

Recommendation 4.

The AEU therefore supports the recommendation by Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) that a National Reference Group on Women in VET to oversee the implementation of 'Women Shaping our Future' and to provide advice to Ministers and CEOs.

4. Possible Advisory Models

Work to improve participation and training and employment outcomes may be conceptualised on three levels:

- (i) Work to address issues common across client groups aimed at improving the inclusiveness and responsiveness of the training system generally (including intersecting issues of disadvantage that many people in target client groups experience);
- (ii) Work to address issues that are unique or specific to target client groups; and
- (iii) Work to identify and address emerging client groups and/or issues.

4.1 Q 3.3 How could the arrangement play a part in the identification of emerging issues/target groups?

- 4.1.1 The AEU believes there is a need for flexibility to address emerging issues and target groups can be handled if consultation is handled at the state and territory level where

students and clients and advocacy groups can quickly identify changing priorities. There are many ways in which this can then be fed through to the Commonwealth.

- 4.1.2 The AEU believes that how the VET system deals with emerging target equity groups will be crucial, particularly in the near future. The Commonwealth's 'Welfare to Work' policy will create demand for education and training opportunities, from parents with particular barriers facing them. Whether young single parents, mature age parents and those second income earners, these potential students may find access due to training costs or inflexibility to be significant deterrents. The potential for limited pathways for many of these would-be VET participants should also concern DEST.
- 4.1.3 The AEU believes that the broadening of the scope of stakeholders involved in consultation, at whatever level, should be ensured to enable welfare groups representing parents (working or otherwise) to participate.

4.2 Q 3.8 What work should the advisory arrangement undertake to enable it to deliver high level advice on the needs of all learners?

- 4.2.1 The most pressing need is for work to address issues common across client groups aimed at improving inclusiveness and responsiveness of the training system general, whilst acknowledging work already commenced for Indigenous and Disability groups, which must proceed as a matter of urgency.
- 4.2.2 The AEU supports the formation of a Commonwealth Equity client group, and if established it should be responsible for liaising with state and territory Training Authorities, and relevant groups, around issues that required consultation and to collate the information gathered. It should however be independent of Government.

Recommendation 5.

The AEU recommends that future client/student advisory models should be able to recommend the National Senior Officials committee establish an Action Group on a particular issue. An example where such a proposal fits with DEST's current suggestions is where the discussion paper poses the option of "providing students and representative bodies with the opportunity to focus-test priorities, strategies and/or proposed policy (identified by researchers industry, government etc)."

4.3 Q 3.9 What is/are the best mechanism/s to engage with clients identified above? (eg. roundtables, surveys, focus groups, forums, consultations with representative bodies)?

- 4.3.1 The Commonwealth provides around a third of VET funding to states and territories, and engages in the setting of broad policy parameters. However, states and territories provide the bulk of funding and are responsible for operation of VET - consequently

the AEU believes it is important that any new advisory arrangements are undertaken at state and territory level, close to where students and clients are.

- 4.3.2 Further, states and territories already have a variety of consultative mechanisms for consultation around the development of their VET priorities, and to ensure regular input from a variety of groups. Institutes often have boards and other industry/community groups involved in providing advice around local needs. States and territories also have mechanisms whereby their equity units consult with relevant bodies, and have teaching areas where the main focus is providing Outreach and educational programs meeting the needs of local communities, especially target groups and disadvantaged groups. These mechanisms should be used to feed information to a national level, but should not be replicated.
- 4.3.3 The AEU supports WAVE's submission, which comments that there is a need to build a voice for equity into the training system. WAVE argues that recommendations must be devised as to how advice can be effectively incorporated, resourced and implemented into the training system to see long term progress. At some level a pool of representative gender equity experts will be needed as consultants, identified for consultation. This knowledge and expertise can be directed to a national advisory equity taskforce to assess and formulate and prioritise high level advice to ministers and CEOs; the AEU agrees.
- 4.3.4 WAVE also rightly argues that industry is not in a position to be an advocate for marginalised and/or disadvantaged learners. The tension between meeting industry needs and addressing equity issues will not disappear. The advisory process needs a measure of independence from government filtering and control if it is to be successfully representative and provide high level advice.
- 4.3.5 The AEU believes that states and territories could in some cases improve consultation with students in general. The obligation to ensure this through appropriate means could be a reporting outcome required by the Commonwealth, with suggested ways of this occurring as suggested in the paper - e.g. forums, focus groups on specific issues etc. There could be encouragement of student forums at state and territory levels on specific issues, as part of the ongoing work of the VET sector to improve quality and ensure needs of students are met. Similar mechanisms should be used with teachers and educators, with the opportunity to listen to and consult with teacher unions, which advocate and represent on their behalf.

4.4 Other

Q 3.26 What other activities could the advisory arrangement engage in to improve access to training and outcomes for all students? (e.g. forming partnerships; identifying, promoting and rewarding best practice).

- 4.4.1 The AEU recommends that the advisory arrangements should indeed promote rewarding best practice at every opportunity. In order to do so with credibility however, national and state/territory data needs to be gathered by the VET system and

this must essentially be disaggregated by gender as well as other equity related variables.

- 4.4.2 NCVER, in its comprehensive research role, should also be a part of the advisory arrangements, given the importance of using the research that has involved student and client groups to-date, and the need to inform future research required by such a group. The group should also have representatives of NSOC, NISC and NQC for the purposes of consistency. Reporting arrangements would be through to NSOC or MCVET.
- 4.4.3 Consultation with students requires allocation of time and resources. Therefore the AEU recommends that consultation with representative bodies of student equity groups will be significant and so DEST should not attempt to create student bodies where representative structures already exist on campuses, for example student unions in the TAFE system.

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