

# Gender Equality in School Education

## PRIORITIES

1. The review of national curriculum by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) should include gender equality, respectful relationships, safe and consensual sexuality education as core components of the relevant curriculum from Foundation-12 or K-12. These curriculum components should be inclusive of sex, gender and sexual diversity and be age, stage and culturally appropriate.
2. A national agreement should be developed by the Federal Government in cooperation with states and territories to mandate respectful relationships, sexuality and consent education across Australian schools.
3. The four key drivers of gender-based violence should form part of the content of these core components of the curriculum, that is:
  - a. Condoning of violence against women.
  - b. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence.
  - c. Stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity.
  - d. Disrespect toward women and male peer relations that emphasise aggression. The participation of students in such education should be with the approval of and in cooperation with parents or carers.

## RATIONALE

There were over 4 million students enrolled in all schools across Australia in 2020. There were 288,000 Full Time Equivalent teachers in these schools of whom 206,000 were female. This is a vast community.

The school sector has been the site of debate and contest about funding, curriculum, teaching quality and practice, governance, parental authority and participation, among other issues. Schools are critical to the education and social development of students. Schools should be socially and culturally supportive and safe environments for all students.

WEL has strongly advocated over decades for schools to ensure that student participation, performance and achievement are not adversely affected by rigid notions of gender and gender stereotype setting different expectations for girls than for boys or excusing unacceptable behaviours based on gender.

The groundwork for this was laid by a number of seminal reports on girls and schooling produced in the 1970's and 80's: the Schools Commission in November 1975; the Australian Education Council in September 1985 and the Commonwealth Schools Commission in May 1987. Every state and territory had a policy on sexism or non-sexist education or equality of opportunity and the elimination of sexism.



Despite this, and despite the passing of the Australian Sex Discrimination Act (1984), the power imbalances in schools, sexual harassment and discrimination are still present nearly four decades later.

The development of school curriculum is led by ACARA in collaboration with state and territory authorities and the non-government education sector. It has been conducting a review of national curriculum and this review must address the scourge of violence against women by ensuring that there is content built into curriculum which aims for primary prevention of violence against women.

Principles set out in the National Policy of 1987 should serve as a foundation for this review, namely that:

Schooling for girls and boys should reflect the entitlement of all women, in their own right, to personal respect, economic security and participation in, and influence over, decisions which affect their lives (p28).

The Federal Government with states and territories supports Our Watch. It has been established as a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children. It works to embed gender equality and prevent violence where Australians live, learn, work and socialise.

Our Watch has developed the *Respectful Relationships Education Toolkit* designed “to help schools develop and implement a whole school approach to prevent gender-based violence by promoting equality and respectful relationships”. This Toolkit needs to be the basis of effective programs across Australia.

Schools can normalise or challenge gender-based violence. They can contribute to addressing gender inequality and stereotyping by introducing gender responsive and sensitive content throughout the relevant curriculum.

Whole school approaches to curbing gender-based violence which are in-depth, ongoing and use a wide range of teaching methods, can have a positive and enduring influence on students. But there are many challenges for teachers and schools in delivering such programs. Teacher preparation and training and school planning is essential and this needs to involve parents and the broader community.

The March4Justice, 15 March 2021 brought thousands of Australian women onto the streets in rallies demanding a government response to male violence and sexual assault. While the prevention of violence against women is everybody’s business, it is schools which can construct the foundations for prevention by contributing to changing attitudes, behaviours and practices

and building knowledge and beliefs about gender respect. Gender equality needs to be woven into the school's culture, policies and practices.

WEL considers that mandated respectful relationships education programs are a critical part of an intricate tapestry of measures required to end all forms of violence against women.



## Vocational Education and Training (VET)

### PRIORITIES

1. The care economy, where women predominate as workers, should attract increased government training investment through the allocation of subsidized training places for entry level courses together with courses for re-training or upgrading skills.
2. Affordable tertiary education opportunities through TAFE or a VET provider, should be available for part-time women workers in low paid industries and in insecure work to assist them to diversify and expand their occupational choices as well as advancing to better paid decent jobs.
3. The JobTrainer Fund established to address the economic impact of COVID-19 and targeted at school leavers and the young unemployed should be extended beyond 2022 and places allocated to support aged care and other care industries with skills gaps and shortages identified by Royal Commission inquiries (aged care, disability).
4. The entry of women into better-paying male-dominated occupations, which attract training subsidies and assured job security, should be facilitated by targeted specialised training support which is gender sensitive, culturally safe and appropriate and customized to address their learning requirements.

### RATIONALE

Women's skills and their paid and unpaid labour are an essential part of Australian society and its economy. Recovery from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic needs to take account of the loss of jobs by many women in industries where they are the major employees: hospitality, retail, arts and tourism. Indigenous women, CALD women and women with a disability, whether they are young or older face particular challenges in accessing training. Low paid workers in the care industries are often also low-skilled. Opportunities for all these groups of women to upgrade their skills or retrain are dependent on a receptive and supportive employer as well as availability and affordability of VET courses.

The Government in its Women's Budget Statement, 2021-22 pp.48-49, acknowledged that graduates of VET tend to have strong labour market outcomes. Female students comprised 46% of total VET students in 2019, but were concentrated in education, health or natural and physical sciences fields of study.

VET is critical to gender equality. Lack of access to affordable courses or inadequate support to complete courses does result in fewer options for women. The gendered links between women's participation in VET and decent well-paid work must be better acknowledged and understood. TAFE, the public VET provider, had over many years developed the policies to pursue improvement in women's participation in the full range of VET courses particularly in emerging industries.

WEL with the National Foundation of Australian Women has argued that the restoration of TAFE as the major VET publicly funded provider is essential to the future of Australia's economy and the recovery from the pandemic, as well as the well-being of women so that they can contribute to their financial independence and economic security.

The extension of the JobTrainer Fund beyond 2022, given the support it has so far provided for women working in the aged care sector, would be a boost to women's skills, employment prospects and potentially their wages and could contribute to major improvements in the quality of aged care delivered by current providers. Measuring the outcomes from this additional funding should be a requirement of all VET providers. Enrolments and completions by gender and field of study are not collected in a timely way nor further disaggregated by language, CALD background, disability and Indigenous groups.

The Australian Apprenticeship Support Network delivering 5000 additional Gateway Services for in-training support for women commencing in non-traditional occupations is another model of targeted funding which needs to be expanded and integrated into VET system student support. This program should be a priority of the Federal Government given the parlous state of the structured and subsidised apprenticeship and traineeship system.

The obsession by all governments with having industry-led, user-pays vocational education and training, reflected in successive budgets and reviews and then restructuring and reform, has simply resulted in dramatic declines in apprentice and trainee numbers. As of September 2020, according to NCVER figures on commencements of apprentices and trainees, only 2% of workers were employed as apprentices or trainees. Of the 126,665 commencements, there were only 60,115 trade apprentices – a decline of 15.7% from 2019 and 66,545 non-trades down by 21.4% from 2019. Of the total, 81,955 were male and 44,710 were female, down 18.6% from 2019. Overall the decline in commencements as well as completions has continued its downward spiral. Between 2016 and 2020, commencements fell by 25.4% and completions fell by 22.4%.

During 2020, there was significant disruption to this part of the training system, dependent as it is on workplace-based training, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Recent analysis conducted by Michelle Hall for NCVER on the impacts of COVID-19 on training activity in that year, showed, for example, contract suspensions increased by nearly 600% for females in the March and June quarters of 2020; for males it was between 200% and 300%. The industries that experienced some of the most substantial disruption to contract commencements included: administrative and support services; transport, postal and warehousing, and information, media and telecommunications. The industries that experienced the most prominent increases in contract suspensions in the first half of 2020 included arts and recreation services; accommodation and



food services; transport, postal and warehousing; retail trade, and agriculture, forestry and fishing.

WEL calls on the NCVER to collect data by sex and publish this data at other intersections of disadvantage: Indigenous, people with a disability, people from CALD communities as well as regional breakdowns. Good policy and program development requires a sound and contemporary evidence base.

# Early childhood education and care

## PRIORITIES

**1. Federal Government to lead a national transition to free early childhood education and care.**

Free early childhood education and care would remove cost and conditions as impediments to children's participation, simplify what is presently a complex subsidy system for parents to navigate and remove disincentives for primary carers, who are overwhelmingly women, to enter and remain in full-time employment.

**2. Federal Government to work with states and territories to establish universal pre-school for all 3 and 4 year olds.**

Universal pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds has the potential to improve children's cognitive, emotional and social development and their school performance.

**3. Government action to boost pay, conditions, professional recognition and career pathways for early childhood educators and teachers.**

High quality early education and care requires a well-trained, highly skilled professional workforce with good pay and conditions. Improved pay, professional recognition and career pathways will lead to greater stability in the industry which is currently facing a staffing crisis related to high staff turnover and difficulties in attracting professional educators.

**4. Align early childhood education and care policies and delivery with 12 months paid parental leave shared between parents and legislated flexible work and leave provisions for parents and caregivers.**

An increase to the OECD average of 12 months paid parental leave shared by parents, with an option of staging the leave in blocks over 2 years, would help parents to care for children in the first 2 years.

Transition to early childhood care and education with more flexible work provisions in awards could follow shared paid leave. Single parents should be eligible for 12 months paid leave in recognition of the additional burden of parenting.

**5. Review the market driven system for early childhood education and care, including responsibilities for funding, delivery and standards.**

A fully independent expert review into Australia's current market based childcare and early learning system should consider: the levels of government which are best suited to fund, regulate and deliver services; avenues for more diverse community control and input; the appropriateness of profit driven services, and opportunities for more direct government leadership and involvement in the sector.

**6. Develop a clear national vision for early childhood education and care as a basis for funding decisions to drive improvements in standards and frame service design and delivery.**

Australia needs better public and political understanding of the multiple ways a well-funded universal early childhood education and care system could play in future 'nation building':



reduce costs for rearing children; enable women's full workforce participation; foster all children's cognitive, social and emotional development and, through pre-school, assist education equity through school preparation and improved education outcomes.

## RATIONALE

*The counting the cost to families: Assessing childcare affordability in Australia report* (August 2021) models the impact of the Federal Government's recent childcare subsidy announcement. This found that one in three families are spending more on childcare than groceries to feed their family and 85% of families are spending more on childcare than on their utility bills. The report uses an international benchmark of no more than 7% of disposable income spent on childcare to determine childcare affordability for families. Up to 50% of households spend more than 7% of their income on childcare costs.

A complex fee subsidy system, intersecting with tax and other allowances, discourages mothers' full time workforce participation, contributing to Australia having one of the lowest proportions of women in full time work in the OECD. Women constitute 38.0% of all full-time employees and 67.6% of all part-time employees.

Activity test conditions which restrict access to subsidized childcare to children whose parents either work or engage in approved activities have limited the access to childcare of some of the poorest children who could benefit the most from quality early education and care.

The Federal Government spends around \$8m a year on childcare subsidies. Free childcare could triple this but would be more than compensated by gains in productivity from women's workforce participation and improvements in school performance.

Relative to other advanced economies such as the UK and NZ, Australian children are significantly less likely to participate in formal childcare in the crucial developmental years of ages 3 and 4. Only 66% of 3 year old Australians are in any type of formal care compared with 100% in the UK and 95% in New Zealand. This is particularly the case with children of poor and geographically isolated families and Aboriginal children who are most disadvantaged in the formal education system. Australia has some of the most inequitable education outcomes in the OECD. There is a range of research showing that participation in 2 years of pre-school is linked with later cognitive, emotional and social development and school achievement.

The overwhelming proportion of early childhood educators are women. Their average take home pay is around \$21 an hour. Recent attempts by industry unions to make the case for work value cases have failed. There is consensus amongst advocates, researchers and most peak bodies that due to low wages, low levels of professional recognition, very limited career



pathways and worsening conditions, including staff shortages and provider expectations for unpaid work, the sector is undergoing a worsening staffing crisis with low levels of recruitment and retention and high turnover.

A recent workforce survey *Big Steps*, by the United Workers Union, found that 37% of educators did not intend to stay in the sector long-term and of this group 74% intend to leave within the next 3 years.

At 18 weeks, Australia's paid parental leave scheme, paid to the primary carer, is one of the shortest in the OECD. The average length of paid parental leave in the OECD is around 55 weeks. Despite 2 weeks paid 'dads' leave' on top of the 18 weeks, Australian fathers take very little leave and spend less time with their children than their OECD peers. In conjunction with flexible work arrangements, a staged increase to 12 months paid parental leave to be shared by both parents and taken in blocks over 2 years would help parents to care for children in the first 2 years, with supported transition to flexible care services and more formal early childhood education and care.

The current market driven system for early childhood education and care is fragmented and expensive for parents, while being dependent on multiple funding sources from state and federal governments. 50% of providers are private for-profit with around 35% private not-for-profits and the remainder a mix of state government schools, state government, local government and a few private and Catholic schools.

Pre-school and long day care services overlap and vary across states. Large ASX listed for-profit providers dominate the long day care sector, alongside small for-profit operators, large not-for-profits and some community providers. Parents are confused by the fee subsidy based on income, regular unregulated fee increases following new government funding to providers, the activity test - which especially impacts single mothers and poorer communities - and other conditions such as the number of children a family already has in childcare and pre-school.

This complexity and the confusion it creates for parents contributes to Australia's low participation rate in formal early childhood education and care relative to other OECD countries.

Government inquiries, advocates and researchers (such as the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning in 2014) agree on the multiple benefits to Australia from investing in a high quality and universal early childhood education and care system. The sector is rightly seen as the major economic driver for women's workplace participation and associated productivity increases, but there is less emphasis on the related long-term benefits for children, parents (particularly equalizing with fathers the current care burdens carried by mothers), parental well-being and the community.

A national vision statement would clarify and spell out the roles early childhood education and care can play in strengthening Australia's economic life, social inclusion, education equity and well-being, and would help shape future planning and funding priorities.