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Changing Labour Market and Gender Equality: The Role of Policy

GENDER EQUITY AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) REFORM IN AUSTRALIA

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This document is a detailed outline of the presentation by Philip C. Candy, University of Ballarat, Australia. The presentation will be made at Workshop C on "Mobility and Careers".

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GENDER EQUITY AND VET REFORM IN AUSTRALIA

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Background

1. Australia is a Federation of six States and two Territories. Because responsibility for workplace reform is a shared responsibility – not only between the private and public sectors, but between different jurisdictions *within* the public sector – it is difficult to explain fully all the policy initiatives which have been implemented over the past decade. Nevertheless, the major vehicle for bringing about greater gender equity has been reform of Vocational Education and Training (VET), and accordingly that is the focus of this presentation.

The Reform Process

2. Over the past decade, Australia has been engaged in a process of reform directed at the development of a modern system of vocational education and training that is responsive to the skill needs of industry. Equity issues have been important throughout this decade of training reform.

3. The reform agenda has led to the development of a system that is industry-led and which involves the key role of national competency standards in a competency based approach to skill formation. A major objective has been to achieve greater industry training so that productivity gains will be achieved for Australian industry through the broadening and deepening of the national skill base. During the past decade, several phases of VET reform can be identified.

4. The initial phase, up to about 1993, was linked to industrial relations objectives in a process of re-structuring industrial awards. This meant that both employers and unions were involved, in collaboration with government agencies, in the reform process. In order to oversee the development and endorsement of national competency standards, a National Training Board was established with representation of all States, the Commonwealth, employers, and unions on the Board. National competency standards were developed by industry bodies and then approved by the Board.

5. During the second phase, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established under Commonwealth legislation with a broader mandate to develop the VET system on a national basis. The role of ANTA is covered by formal agreement between the Commonwealth and States and its work is supervised by a Council of Commonwealth and State Ministers (MINCO).

6. Soon after the establishment of ANTA, the third phase of the reform agenda was initiated with a focus on:

- demand side measures including a greater market orientation and user choice; and
- simplification of procedures to make the system more friendly and less cumbersome.

Policies for Gender Equity

7. Gender equity has been a key objective throughout the decade of training reform. Policy measures adopted throughout the decade to further this objective have included:

a) ensuring that national competency standards were free of gender bias

The procedures adopted by the National Training Board, and subsequently by ANTA, were directed at ensuring that draft national competency standards submitted for endorsement did not contain gender bias. ANTA has maintained this policy through its current latest approach to the development and endorsement of Training Packages.

b) broadening entry level training through apprenticeships and traineeships to new occupations and industries

This was seen as a way of opening new pathways for girls and women into jobs. This reform process is continuing with the current implementation of New Apprenticeships.

c) adopting more targeted approaches for specific groups

This approach has been supported by the development in 1996 of a National Women's VET Strategy which is overseen by a National VET Women's Taskforce established by the Commonwealth/State Ministerial Council. The Strategy represents collective action towards agreed objectives with a number of focus areas built into the Strategy in order to directed action in a concerted way towards agreed priorities. The focus areas in the Strategy are: continuous improvement measures; training and staff development; standards, curriculum, and delivery; pathways planning; balanced representation; promotion; and research.

8. Outcomes for the VET system identified in the Strategy are directed specifically towards:
- a) higher number of women in management position; and
 - b) broader distribution of women across industries at various levels.

Outcomes

9. The socio-economic influences that have limited gender equity in VET and employment are deeply entrenched, and it would be naïve to expect a rapid reversal of this situation. Nevertheless, training reform in Australia has put in place an infrastructure that should over time produce more equitable outcomes.

10. At the same time, however, changes in the context of VET and workplace learning - such as the rapid move towards technologically mediated learning - are throwing up a new generation of equity issues, which will require comprehensive strategies in response. Central to the emerging environment of the 21st century are the pressures that are making lifelong learning an imperative for all, and accordingly the new policy directions are likely to include an emphasis on developing and supporting lifelong learners.