

A course for a lifetime

Linda Simon – Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE)

Annette Bonnici – TAFE NSW Northern Sydney Institute

Abstract

Women are one of the six equity groups identified by NVEAC, yet little has been researched and published about specific programs for women in vocational education and training. Research into disadvantage in general often includes gender, and this issue has been explored as part of ‘disengaged youth’, the need for increased language, literacy and numeracy skills, and training needs of older workers. This research will focus on programs that are specifically run for women in TAFE, and seek to measure their success, especially in their access to pathways that will take women into further education, community engagement or employment. We will focus on access programs, either in specific skills areas such as IT or through Outreach programs. We will seek to measure these programs against the principles for successful equity programs identified by NVEAC, including:

- * supported learner pathways and transitions built into the learning experience
- * training being integrated with work experience and/or aligned with areas of labour
- * embedded support for foundation skills
- * the voice of the learner being heard and acted upon

Our research will include a literature review and five case studies of programs run for women and measured against these principles.

Introduction

Women are one of the six equity groups identified by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), and in their Equity Blueprint 2011-2016, they state that “Judgments about how VET systems and processes are performing in terms of equity can be made by monitoring the access, participation and outcomes of these groups of learners for whom opportunities have traditionally been poorer.” (NVEAC 2011) Women are also highly represented in many of the other equity groups, and multiple disadvantages are often not given the attention they deserve. The Blueprint also identifies six areas which the Council believes that if reformed, will make a real, difference to those who experience disadvantage, ... “while making the VET system stronger for all learners.” (NVEAC 2011) From these six reform areas, the Council then identifies a number of “good practice principles which underpin programs and initiatives that are achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged learners.” (NVEAC 2011) In our research, we selected and collapsed these principles into four areas which were most relevant for measuring VET educational programs for women:

- * supported learner pathways and transitions built into the learning experience
- * training being integrated with work experience and/or aligned with areas of labour
- * embedded support for foundation skills
- * the voice of the learner being heard and acted upon

One of the main issues that has informed our research has been the lack of any real focus in recent years on women as an equity group and their outcomes in education and training. It has become difficult to find research focused on women only, and women’s units have all but disappeared from TAFE Institutes across the country. The most significant research took

place at least a decade ago, probably under the auspices of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), and the priorities of state/territory and federal governments have not sought to maintain that focus. Gender equity units in TAFE Institutes and government education departments have focused on the equality issues rather than issues relating specifically to the disadvantages for either gender. Non-education specific research continues to be conducted that highlights the issues relating to poverty of aged women, discrimination in relation to women in the workplace, lack of women in management and Board positions, and unfair maternity leave and employment practices. The relevance of vocational and adult education to addressing in part some of these disadvantages, is significant. Yet, funding continues to be cut from women's programs, and there are not many that now exist in TAFE Institutes.

These issues led us to consider whether there was still a place for women's programs in VET. Did they have real outcomes? Were there any differences between women undertaking specific women's programs and enrolling in mainstream courses, perhaps with additional support? What were the success rates of women's programs, both for individuals and for society?

According to economic research, increasing the number of women in the workforce is a critical element of Australia's increased prosperity. In his report entitled 'Game Changers: Economic reform priorities for Australia' John Daley from the Grattan Institute stated that: "If Australian governments want to increase rates of economic growth they must reform the tax mix, and increase the workforce participation rates of women and older people. Together these game-changing reforms could contribute more than \$70 billion to the Australian economy. Governments should concentrate their limited resources for economic reform where they can have the greatest impact on Australian prosperity." (Grattan Institute 2012)

To do this, it appeared important to us that there were greater opportunities for women and girls to undertake relevant programs that would allow them to gain employment, and that they should receive support along the lines of the principles outlined by NVEAC that would ensure their success. We have undertaken five case studies of women's programs in TAFE, concentrating particularly on access programs where many disadvantaged women may be found. We attempted to find women's programs in NSW, South Australia and Victoria, but the Victorian case studies did not eventuate. This report presents our findings from the case studies and measures the outcomes against the NVEAC principles. Given the reported impact of these women's programs, we felt the title 'A Course for a Lifetime' was most appropriate.

Literature Review

As already highlighted there has not been much recent literature around women's programs in vocational and adult education, and even the NVEAC case studies around the equity groups only provide one specific example. This study has outcomes similar to the case studies we undertook. The NVEAC case study was of a New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course at Perth City Farm, and delivered by Central Institute of TAFE in WA. It is also an access course at Certificate I level and it targets women who have been out of the workforce or education for a long period of time. Perhaps exactly the women referred to in the Grattan Institute's report 'Game Changers'. It is a "foundation course designed to provide women with the knowledge, skills and support to transition into further education or employment including:

- * increased confidence for returning to work or education;
- * a broadened awareness of personal, vocational and training options;
- * communication skills to deal with issues affecting their lives; and
- * computer and maths skills to enhance pathway options.” (NVEAC 2012)

Like many programs designed specifically for women, it is delivered in school friendly hours, and uses an integrated and holistic delivery model. The retention rate in 2010 was 67%, with six women gaining employment and six progressing to further education and training from an initial cohort of thirty. The group in WA summarised the success factors as including making the course more accessible to women by using a community-based setting and an actual enterprise project. These factors were also true of the case studies we looked at. Having the right lecturer for the group was considered important, as indicated in the South Australian case study we undertook. The NVEAC project also noted the importance of an inclusive supportive atmosphere which led to enduring friendships, also indicated in our Blue Mountains Horticulture case study.

From all of the case studies that NVEAC wrote up around the equity groups, the Council described the key messages that emerged demonstrating the importance of VET to highly disadvantaged learners. They included that:

- * Certificate I and II preparatory (or access) programs can play a vital role in engaging individuals who have experienced multiple disadvantages and/or who have been long-term disengaged from learning
- * embedding and contextualising foundation skills within VET programs is a proven effective learning model
- * holistic support, including mentoring, case management and cross-cultural awareness leads to good results
- * effective training requires flexibility and capacity to tailor learning to the needs of the individual
- * linking work experience with training increases the likelihood of sustainable employment (NVEAC 2012)

Again these key messages are reflected in the principles defined by NVEAC.

In their 2003 report on Women in VET, Mary Dickie and Ingrid Fitzgerald comment on a range of factors that women require if they are to successfully undertake VET courses. As in much of the literature on women’s programs, they focus on the importance of recognition of prior learning, work placement opportunities and taster courses, and the need for training to be flexible to allow women to meet their commitments to family and part-time work. They also comment: “Lack of confidence is a significant barrier for many women accessing training opportunities; for example, on re-entering the workforce, or re-skilling following redundancy.” (P. 49)

Similar findings were arrived at by Helen Connole in “Making training work for women”, and she provided a number of recommendations, including the need for personal support, pathways information, flexible delivery with arrangements to allow women to exit and re-enter courses, and activities with immediate relevance.

Security4Women (eS4W), one of the six women’s alliances, funded a project in 2009 undertaken by Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) and called “Women and VET: Strategies for Gender Inclusive VET Reform”. The researchers write of the male

dominated VET system, and the struggle that VET has undertaken to “offer programs that appeal to women and, more importantly, enable them to gain sustainable employment outcomes commensurate with their skill and qualification.” (WAVE, 2009, p. 5) More importantly they go on to say that there is a “link between women’s long-term economic security and equitable access to, participation in, and outcomes from vocational education and training. Vocational education and training offers a pathway to unemployed and underemployed Australians and up-skilling or career progression for existing workers. Research demonstrates that targeted women’s programs within VET lead to increased individual agency, well-being and overall levels of community capacity.”(WAVE 2009, p. 7) The case studies we have considered in this report further support these findings. The researchers finalise the report by stating that: “Affordable, accessible VET remains critical for women from low socio-economic backgrounds who may suffer from a lack of visibility within the community and may also suffer detrimental effects of the global financial crisis.” (WAVE 2009, p. 40)

Recent literature around VET programs for women has tended to focus on women in non-traditional trades. In an Occasional Paper for NCVER, “The female ‘tradie’: Challenging employment perceptions in non-traditional trades for women”, Fiona Shewring from the TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute, as well as describing the sort of support that enables women to make careers in areas such as Painting and Decorating, reflects that: “Women can enrol in introductory courses, enabling them to gain the skills and confidence to continue on to Certificate III trade courses.” Many women’s programs of the type we describe in this study, provide just these skills for women, as well as the confidence and ability to progress on to higher qualifications leading to employment.

As well as the Grattan Report referred to earlier, a number of critical industries often the domain of males, are welcoming the participation of women and recognising their contribution to Australia’s economic growth. One such report from the mining industry comments: "There are a number of ways resource employers can build on their female workforce, from introducing flexible work practices, to ensuring work villages are built to accommodate women and actively engaging with schools and universities to promote resource industry careers to female students. Leaving stereotypical assumptions aside, many roles in the mining industry are gender-neutral, making way for entry level and higher tertiary roles available for women. There are a range of jobs available including scientific, business, trade-based roles, as well as a need for qualified support staff such as psychologists. Hard-hat roles, including dump truck drivers, as well as cleaners, hospitality staff, engineers and project managers are just some of the endless career opportunities for women in the resources sector. The industry also knows that getting women into mining is good business. As NSW Minerals Council spokesperson, Lindsay Hermes says: The more women we can attract into the industry, the more the industry will change to accommodate us. It's not political correctness, it is a good business – and that is exactly what the mining industry is." (Women’s Agenda 2013)

What we did!

In our research we spoke to convenors/teachers of a range of women’s programs in TAFE. We asked them to describe the program/course, and to address a series of questions:

- * What are the aims of the program/course?
- * How do you ensure that these aims are met?

- * Do you have supported learner pathways and transitions built into the learning experience? What are these and how do you measure their success?
- * Is training integrated with work experience and/or aligned with areas of labour market demand? How do you do this and how do you measure success of this strategy?
- * Do you embed support for foundation skills? How do you do this and how do you measure success of this strategy?
- * Do you design your program and make changes based on what learners have to say and their stated needs? How do you do this?
- * Why are you running a program targeted at women only? What do you understand that such a program can offer women as opposed to supporting women in a mainstream TAFE program?

The five case studies we focused on are courses specifically designed and run for women. They are:

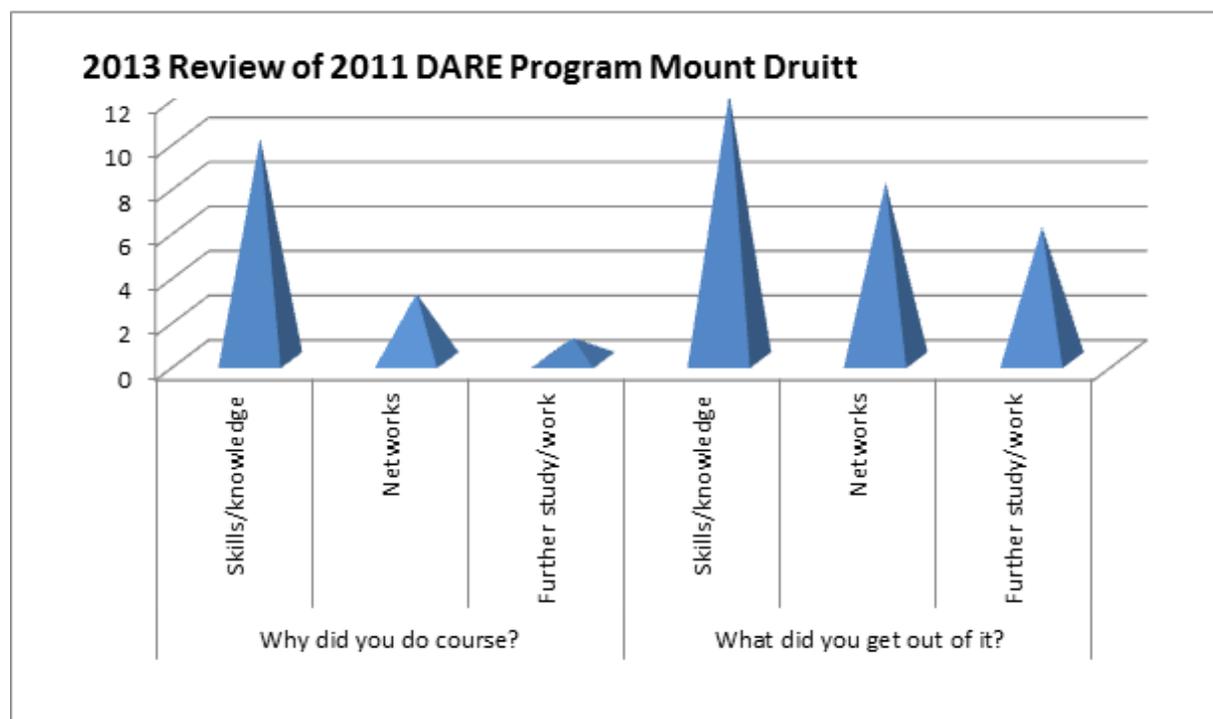
- * a community Outreach course – NSW. This course was designed around what the community wanted. It used a framework course of Community Engagement with flexible units to which content can be added, in this case horticulture. The learning is negotiated with the women, it validates the life experiences of the women, and it is an organic course.
- * a Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) course in computing – NSW. The WOW program is designed for women wishing to return to the workforce or for women planning to enter employment for the first time. The WOW course can be adjusted for any vocational area, but this college has chosen to focus on IT as most students express a desire to learn these skills.
- * a Career Education and Employment for Women (CEEW) course – NSW. This Certificate II course is a set curriculum with adjustable vocational content, and provides women with work ready skills in communication, maths, computing and other areas.
- * a Digi-Girls (Digital girls) program – NSW. This course was set up originally for adolescent girls to engage in IT, and works in partnership between TAFE and schools. There is also a course that can be run for women beyond school. There is a model Certificate III course, and the vocational content varies depending on current trends and industry needs. As it is aimed at school girls, it tends to be run in the form of a taster course, that could lead to more in-depth study. The program over the years has included IT Networking, Multimedia, News Production, Robotics, Airbrushing, Film and TV, Green Cafe, Spark Art, Animation and Radio.
- * a Women’s Education program – encompassing Certificates II, III and IV – SA. This course is run at three different certificate levels, and one of its most powerful features is the use of a feminist pedagogy. Certificate II is focused on entry-level for return to study, Certificate III has more study skills and electives, and Certificate IV is aimed at women planning to go on to University.

All of these programs cover a variety of fields but they share common aims, including:

- * to build confidence and help women regain dignity
- * to strengthen the community to enable people to work together
- * to rebadge skills and raise awareness of what is expected at work

- * to increase skills for further study or employment
- * to accelerate skills and to have real and meaningful outcomes
- * to build skills, knowledge and confidence so that the women can join the workforce, volunteer or embark on further study
- * to support the women to see themselves as learners who are capable of studying a wide range of subjects, with pathways to further education and employment
- * to provide women with support and an inclusive environment for skills development
- * to provide work experience where possible

In general the outcomes of the courses are met, sometimes by formal assessment and generally by student feedback. A number of the co-ordinators/teachers assess the outcomes through destination surveys at the time of completion and later. An example is on the graph below. Overall the completion rates for the courses are high.



The Digi-Girls program is particularly interesting in that it follows up the participants through Career Advisers in schools and parents, and develops a database of women and girls who have undertaken the courses and gives them the opportunity to continue to develop their careers and interests through IT networking and events.

The choice of appropriate teachers was high on the list of ways to ensure these courses met their aims. Teachers were required to not only possess excellent teaching skills, but also broad life experience. They needed to be able to communicate and empathise with the women/girls. Monitoring course progress, mentoring and support services or Counselling, were also considered important in ensuring aims were met.

Each of these courses addressed the issue of learner pathways and transitions in similar but slightly different ways. In the Community course, deliberate learning issues were set up and students were aided in accessing services to address these, including through Counselling and career pathways. The women were encouraged to identify the generic skills they were developing and external speakers assisted by talking about further educational opportunities.

As with most of the courses, study skills and computing were high on the list of skills to be taught, including use of social media and use of the internet to effectively research employment websites and how to apply for work and courses online.

The WOW course has a large component of career education and planning so that students are supported in choosing educational pathways and short and long term employment goals. Students keep a journal/scrapbook with details of jobs they would like to have, and they visit other teaching areas at TAFE colleges to find out more about these possible vocational choices. In planning their work experience, the women are encouraged to choose a workplace that is related to their employment goals.

The CEEW course supports women in a range of ways, including through mentoring, adult study centres, guest speakers and follow-up for those women who may have dropped out of the course for a variety of reasons.

The Digi-Girls program provides information as to what the girls have to do next to pursue this career, and the Women's Education program has units as part of the courses including career awareness, study skills and literacy and numeracy.

The alignment of the training labour market demands and/or inclusion of work experience was an important element of these programs. Overall they were aimed at women wanting to return to the workforce or girls exploring career opportunities, so making the learning relevant to possible job opportunities and community needs was critical both in attracting women to undertake the course and in ensuring they completed.

The Community Course that we discussed was around horticulture and involved developing and working in gardens in the Blue Mountains. The work experience in the gardens is carried out in real time, and resources from the gardens are shared across other courses. A number of the women had been approached to undertake gardening work in the community, and the vocational teachers considered what other skills the students might need such as lawn mowing, to be employable.

Work experience is an essential and integral part of the WOW program. Students are informed of skills shortage areas and encouraged to take this into account when planning career goals. Success of these strategies are measured by the number of students who gain work in their work experience workplaces and by the positive outcomes of the work experience. The CEEW course similarly has a work experience component and skills demand in the local area is considered.

The Digi-Girls program is quite different in some ways, as the course is designed around an area of current demand, including IT Networking, Multimedia, News Production, Robotics, Airbrushing, Film and TV, Green Cafe, Spark Art, Animation and Radio. Innovative areas are chosen to interest the girls and to show them the possibility of careers outside the traditional areas.

One of the most successful courses run through the Women's Education program in SA, was the 'Powerful Pathways for Women' course. This ran for twenty weeks and included a Certificate I in Electro-Communications Skills, Certificate I in Information Technology and Certificate II in Women's Education. The reasons for the success of this particular course included that it was set up at the instigation of industry, to increase diversity within the

industry and to expand the pool of applicants to meet the growing demand for skilled workers, of which women were an important but not necessarily well-tapped part. The commitment of ETSA Utilities meant that they provided financial support, access to workers and the workplace, mock interviews and practice aptitude tests. The TAFE provider and industry worked as a team, with the accredited training providing underpinning knowledge and experience, employability skills development and confidence building. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds were encouraged to apply.

Another example of an industry supported program which was mentioned as an aside during the case studies was Work Wise Women in NSW. In this program women are enrolled in a Certificate III in Information Technology with support for foundation studies. This program was initially funded by a local office of a Global IT Contracting company who had noticed a lack of women in IT in Sydney. After the Global Financial Crisis, the company was no longer able to fund the program but its value had been proven and the TAFE Institute continued to fund the program. Students from this program have gone on to employment in a diverse range of industries and further studies at TAFE and at university.

Embedding support for foundation skills was generally part of the course, although some convenors indicated that literacy and numeracy was not really a problem, such as the Digi-Girls course, and others said that they screened on application and might refer women to basic education courses first. For those that did embed foundation skills, they found that buddying up was an important tool, and some courses provided access to tutorial support for the women. The Community course convenor indicated that they did not formally assess at the start of the course as many of the women found it too daunting. In the WOW course, in-class support is provided by specialist teachers and additional support can be accessed. The CEEW women are assessed up-front and support provided by specialist teaching sections if required.

Negotiated learning was an important element of many of these courses. This was particularly the case in the Community course. A further course that was run for Indigenous women where they developed a Bush Tucker Garden helped to break down many barriers. The WOW and CEEW courses are specifically designed curriculum, but the actual vocational focus is adjusted according to needs and requirements of the students and the local community. In terms of the WOW course, the college has collected about thirteen years of data from pathways and destination surveys, and this is used to inform further course development. The SA Women's Education convenor acknowledged that it can often be a challenge to deliver the curriculum required by the course and to provide what the women need in terms of personal growth.

The last question elicited some interesting and passionate responses. Most of the convenors/teachers believed that a major part of the success of the course was that it was run for women and girls alone. They reflected that often it was about making women feel safe, as many had suffered severe domestic violence. Another convenor said that some of the students would only attend a women's only course for religious reasons. It also allowed for free discussion around issues such as gender roles, domestic violence, family power struggles, children and barriers to learning. Often once the women realised that TAFE provided a safe learning environment, they felt comfortable about moving on to mainstream courses. Overall the all-female environment was supportive and allowed women to take small steps. The women are given a voice to look at barriers and also to build a sense of belonging at the college.

The Digi-Girls program was set up specifically to give girls opportunities that they might not otherwise have without feeling embarrassed or intimidated. The course built confidence and career aspirations, and industry women are able to address the group and speak about skills needed and possibilities for careers. The Women's Education program in SA also indicated that the possibility of online and distance courses was being considered so that more women could access the program. Their survey of students indicated that many women would not have come to study if the course had not been for women only.

Though not specifically requested, many of the convenors/teachers commented that it was very important that these courses be either free or very inexpensive. They believe that the women are not always willing to invest in their own learning preferring to spend on their families. However, once they had experienced the benefits of their return to learning, further study in mainstream classes for which they were then willing to pay, was often undertaken.

Overall, the feedback from teachers and students strongly agreed that there is an important place for women's only programs in the VET market. They provide an opportunity to gain or refresh skills for the workplace with industry tasters and support for foundation skills. More significantly, these courses provide a comfortable and safe environment that will recognise the conflicting pressures that many women experience through home and work responsibilities.

Conclusions

These case studies outline a history of success of women's programs in terms of both enrolments and completions. They are also successful in that they meet the needs of learners and provide real pathways to employment and further education. As measured against the NVEAC principles, they are strong equity programs. As measured by the enthusiasm of the generally female teachers, they are also successful.

In returning to the questions that we asked at the beginning of this report, if they fit the NVEAC principles so strongly, and if they are so successful in terms of completions, and women gaining employment or going on to further study, then why have such programs been under attack for a number of years now, and why are there less programs for women than was once the case? One possible reason is that many of these courses are free, and are measured in terms of cost to the TAFE Institutes rather than a benefit to the productivity of Australia's workforce.

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