



Elaine Butler

Elaine Butler is a Senior Lecturer in Education, at the University of South Australia (UniSA), where she has worked since 1984, with the exception of 1996-1998 incl., when she lectured in work-related courses at the University of Adelaide, in Labour Studies/Social Inquiry. Elaine is a member of Research Centre for Gender Studies at UniSA, and associated with both the Hawke Research Institute (UniSA) and EuroVET.

Central to her research and teaching are the dynamic inter-relationships between the changing nature, organisation and distribution of work and work-related learning, including the global/local policy logics and frameworks in this broad field.



Robyn Woolley

Robyn is National Coconvenor of Women in Adult and Vocational Education Inc (WAVE), a member of the national women's secretariat Security4 Women, vocational education representative on Females in Information Technology and Telecommunications (FITT), and steering committee member of the community grass roots women's organisation Lane Cove Women's Action and Information Group. Robyn is the Women's Strategy Officer for Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE, NSW.

Back to the future? Girls, and young women, working futures, VET and VET in Schools. A snapshot¹

Elaine Butler with Robyn Woolley

Introduction

Females are more likely to experience a troubled transition from school than male school leavers despite a higher rate of completing Year 12 and higher participation rates in post-school education. (Long, 2005)

Recent longitudinal research shows that in general young people have high levels of life satisfaction consistent with previous generations of young Australians. But their satisfaction in life is intimately related to what they are doing as students or workers, to whether they have a full-time job or not, or a course or a career plan that provides direction. To whether they are part of Australia's economic 'insiders' or 'outsiders'.

It may surprise but there are currently more than 560,000 young Australians not in full-time work or study, people who are predominantly on the 'outside' of the Australian economic success story. Most of them – about 330,000 – are women (Spierings, 2006).

Initial engagement with the VET system – whether at school, or in entry level VET – is a critical juncture for girls and young women. The issues ... to address include barriers to considering VET as a viable option, together with the occupational segregation that occurs once girls and young women engage with VET. (Quay Connection, 2003, p. 53)

In Australia, as in other industrialised countries, vocational learning for 'youth' is both a hot topic and a complex contemporary policy issue of high significance. This is especially so for 'youth in transition' – a term utilised to capture and indeed influence the movements of young people from compulsory education to the world of work. It is here in this contested space that boundaries between education sectors, and the institutional divides of employment and education are blurring and evolving.

Perhaps more importantly this is also a significant period in the formation of young people's subjectivities, and their life chances. The choices made by and for young persons at this time are inter-related with the quality and quantity of opportunities

available to them. Such opportunities, and so choices, are also shaped by young people's biographies, their geographical location, gender, race, socio-economic status, family history, educational attainment and aspirations (Beavis, Murphy, Bryce & Corrigan, 2004; Dwyer & Wynn, 2001; Teese & Polese, 2003).

The movement to link vocational learning with compulsory education as a (funded and policy driven) pathway to employability and employment for young people continues to grow at unprecedented rates (DEST, 2006; House of Representatives, 2004). Within this field, a generic concept of youth collapses the perceived life/ education/work experiences and needs of the diverse range of young people into the one category, most often regardless of differentiating factors mentioned above, and including that of gender. There is a dearth of work that focuses on experiences and needs of girls and young women engaged in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and/or *VET in Schools* (VETiS), especially within their socio-cultural, economic and political contexts.

The focus of this article, and of the research findings reported herein, is one that seems to be less than fashionable in these current times: that of girls and young women. We strongly endorse the comments of Spierings (2006, p.1), who recently posited that:

It's a curious thing that there has been such a passionate focus in recent times on boys' participation in schooling – and rightly so – but relative indifference to the labour market opportunities for teenage girls and young adult women.

While full-time jobs for young men are gradually recovering and trade apprenticeships have grown, little attention has been focused on the predominance of casual, part-time and

often low-skilled jobs for young women who have left education. It is true that young women have lower levels of absolute unemployment than young men and they participate in education more readily and for longer, but they are also considerably more prone to precarious employment and to underemployment.

Perhaps it's part of our social condition. The outward signs of distress (at school) – aggression, bullying, misbehaviour – attract parents, communities and policy-makers. Meanwhile the piecemeal nature of serial part-time work tends to be endured as an individual experience, stoicism rather rebellion being a favoured means of coping.

By foregrounding data collected specifically from girls and young women, we sought to redress this relative silencing, albeit in a small way. We also aimed to provide a window into some experiences and issues of Australian girls and young women, in relation to their thoughts about their working futures, and their early engagement with VET.

So – what was the project, and more importantly, what did we learn?

The research: The girls project

While we are all too aware of the dangers of homogenising girls and young women, this project sought to provide some early data, to understand what three cohorts of girls in different parts of urban Australia were doing, saying and thinking, in relation to their working futures, and especially VETiS². The intent of this small-scale research project was to provide snapshots of the perceptions of girls and young women in three states (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia) engaged in VET activities, as part of their school-based activities as they approach transition from school-to-work and/or further study.

Female school leavers continue to face greater disadvantages than males during this period of transition from school-to-work.

The students were highly positive about work experience programs, VET and its relevance, and that the knowledge and skills gained from VET would be useful at some time in the future.

Overview of the research

The growth of vocational education has been rapid, including the delivery of vocational education in schools, by schools, or TAFE, or by private providers. During this process it has been observed, anecdotally and in a very few studies available, that the gendered pattern of course selection, and/or field of study is being repeated with school students' choices. This mirrors those patterns well entrenched in the wider VET system and Australian working lives. The results of labour market gender segregation have been of little benefit to women and are of particular relevance to a study examining linkages between education, work and economic security.

Dwyer & Wyn (2001) are among those researchers who warn of the gender blind approach currently informing *VET in Schools* and school-to-work transitions. In addition, and as reconfirmed by Spierings (2006), recent reports (Long, 2004, 2005) looking into the lives of Australia's young people found that female school leavers continue to face greater disadvantages than males during this period of transition from school-to-work, with an increasing number of girls not in school, or work. This points to differing outcomes from education based on gender, which can have serious life consequences.

This concern is not new and is supported by numerous earlier reports identifying the gendered constructions of cultural, social and domestic barriers to equality of access and outcomes (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000). Further, concern over career choices, and also concern regarding the transition period from school to training or work, were each described as 'a critical juncture for girls and young women' (Quay Connection, 2003). However, studies and initiatives with a focus on girls are all too few.

State-based case studies explored future work aspirations, information patterns of career guidance, and the linkages girls are making with training and life plans. Was their VET (in Schools) and/or early post-school experience a positive learning experience, and one that they anticipate they will return to? What were the trends? The issues? The possibilities?

We wanted to understand more about how girls think and talk about their work aspirations and the complex set of factors leading to subject and occupation/industry related choices by girls who participate in *VET in Schools*. We also wished to ascertain if workplace application of their chosen subject was a motivator for their *VET in Schools* course selection, as well as investigate whether the learning experience was a positive educational experience that might encourage them to consider VET educational pathways post-school

Methodology included a critical literature review, interviews, a questionnaire, and targeted focus groups.

The findings

The following sections draw on and highlight findings documented in various sections of the report (Butler & Woolley, 2005). Given the limitations of this article, not all findings are discussed. However, it should be noted that overall, students were positive about their futures, with many of them intending to undertake further study, mostly through VET or, for some, at university. The students were highly positive about work experience programs, VET and its relevance, and that the knowledge and skills gained from VET would be useful at some time in the future.

Work experience followed similar choice patterns to courses, with personal

interest being the main influence for the majority. Comments also indicated that some girls could see skills transferability from work experience, their own casual employment, school study, and VET study, to future study and work application.

Literature review (Daniels, 2005)

The wide-ranging literature review found disturbingly little to suggest that opportunities and outcomes in relation to working futures and VET will improve for girls and young women in the near future.

This review identified a number of major characteristics within the literature. It identified:

- a narrow research and policy agenda set within the current economically-driven climate of vocationalism in education, which prevails in Australia and internationally
- continued growth of *VET in Schools* and transition-to-work programs
- a gender-neutral or gender-blind approach has subsumed the strong focus on girls' career and vocational needs, evident in the literature of the previous decade
- major funded research operates within a masculinist VET framework.

From these findings, a number of relevant topics were identified, of which four were discussed further in the review. The topics referred to:

- entrenched gendered social conditioning that affects the ways girls and young women approach their future career and life choices
- the current situation for women already in the workplace, that is far from satisfactory, and which young girls are being expected to perpetuate
- the narrow research base informing VET and *VET in Schools*, that

promotes the current gender-blind focus and masculinist framework of vocational training

- a political trend with potential to diminish rather than enhance the role of women and steer women and girls into traditional roles.

The review concluded that discussion of these issues in the literature provides only a partial and simplistic critique of the current situation for girls; that research agendas in the area of *VET in Schools* and transitions to work carry (in large part) assumptions that girls' gendered issues have been dealt with. The focal areas have shifted, leaving girls and young women out of focus. This clouding of girls' issues within research has been documented, with some literature indicating that, for girls and young women, both the current models of transition education and school-linked VET, and the framework of paid work into which they expect and are expected to move, limit opportunities and operate to disadvantage them.

Interviews: Overview of findings

The interviews found that:

- VET subjects provide an additional opportunity to school organised work experience to learn about work.
- The majority of the girls are still choosing traditional (feminised) courses and career paths into the workplace.
- Nearly all the girls told us they felt familiar with the type of work involved in their career choice, but then demonstrated they did not know about job availability or pay rates, or how these factors impact on their career choices or outcomes.
- School-based career advisers are seen as a major source of information about courses and careers.

Both the current models of transition education and school-linked VET and the framework of paid work into which they are expected to move, limit opportunities and operate to disadvantage them.

If the information and guidance they receive at school about work, part-time work placements, VET subject choice and careers, is neither accurate nor broad enough to encourage students to think ‘out of the box’ for their career aspirations, then the gender blind focus and resultant disadvantages will continue.

- Family and friends rate as a significant influence in career decisions.
- The majority of girls felt they were already on a career track – the vast majority stated they planned to do more study in the career area of their choice – demonstrating a high relevance of education for work.
- The majority of the students were in VET courses of their choice and had a high level of satisfaction with VET.
- Participants overwhelmingly perceived the skills and knowledge from VET as useful for their futures – either as a career or for everyday life.
- VET for many was seen as more relevant than school.

Working futures: early career choices

- The young women tended to base their career decisions on what they enjoy and what they are good at.
- In the main, girls’ career choices seem unconnected to employment trends and job availability, and are based on personal preferences without supporting information on the sustainability of this choice.
- While the young women surveyed had strong ideas of what career they wanted, overwhelmingly, the majority of girls had identified future careers in feminised occupations. Girls are continuing to select traditional/feminised areas of work where they are at risk of high rates of casualisation and low rates of pay.
- The data indicate that young women think less about economic security when making decisions about their careers and more about a preferred occupation.
- While most students tended to have a strong idea of the nature of the work involved in their chosen career,

most had no relevant information on job availability or rates of pay in their selected VET area.

Many girls participating in VET while at school are electing industry areas where they are at risk of low remuneration and casualised insecure working futures. This knowledge is highly relevant to young women and may in fact assist them to assess if a potential career route can provide them with the future lifestyle they want – or can afford.

Moving from the individual, this has long-term considerations due to the disproportionate burden of casualisation borne by Australian women. The traditional female orientation of their work experience and future career aspirations gives support to the finding noted in the literature review that entrenched social conditioning that affects the way girls and young women approach their future career and life choices.

Access to information

- Students’ main source of information about the type of work involved in their career of choice was their school. This was augmented by family, friends, and employers.
- Career information appears to fall short and leave invisible the differing labour market experiences of Australian women and girls.
- Students wanted more information about how to succeed in their chosen career, and about how to apply their VET course to maximise outcomes for their future.

If the information and guidance they receive at school about work, part-time work placements, VET subject choice and careers, is neither accurate nor broad enough to encourage students to think ‘out of the box’ for their career aspirations, then the gender blind

focus – and the resultant disadvantage identified in the literature review – will continue.

This has significant implications for both the quality and integrity of information, advice and guidance provided at school, and for the professional development and support necessary for staff to enable them to make a difference to the lives and aspirations of young women studying VET.

Of utmost relevance is the lack of information on job availability and pay rates in the girls' chosen industry areas. There was little demonstration that the girls received any guidance of how (or if) the industry area of personal interest would or could provide economic security. There was no evidence of any understandings of the implications of gender in relation to field of study or work-force patterns and what this would mean to them as individuals.

Connections were not made as to whether pursuing areas of personal interest would provide them with a job, or what the conditions of that job would be like. Moreover, there is no evidence of proactive use of employment forecasts or job growth data to inform girls' choices. While the girls perceive themselves to be on a career path, there appears to be widespread failure to support them by ensuring their choices are fully informed, as they move towards independent futures.

In summary

The above findings have much in common with the international research that does focus on girls, and their experiences of VET, work, and work-related aspirations. For example, the motivation for pursuing careers is similar to that identified in Canadian research (Fenwick, 2004), as is a recognition by young women in the twenty first century, that they

will continue to carry most of the responsibilities related to home and family (Pocock, 2003).

The high potential for the existing global and national/local gendered inequalities to be perpetuated through the choices and pathways that the majority of the girls are selecting is also of high concern. This trend will not enhance opportunities for the economic well-being for such girls. Whether these girls continue studies through VET, in workplaces or as students, or if they continue on to university study, seemingly entrenched gendered patterns of selection are being repeated – as ever.

This brings us to ask the question, posed by Fenwick (2004) in Canada, in similar circumstances, about similar cohorts and issues.

The important question here is: how is it that girls can enjoy higher overall educational achievement but have significantly lower economic achievement than boys? What happens or doesn't happen in girls' career and vocational education to address this disparity? (Fenwick, 2004, p. 178)

Our research findings, précised above, go a long way to answer the latter query.

We argue that appropriate complementary national and state/local policy initiatives and resources to investigate and support girls and young women in their engagement with *VET in Schools* and ensuing career paths is a matter of high priority. Similarly, the collection of gender disaggregated national and state data for *VET in Schools* programs and associated activities is a basic necessity.

Such initiatives must engage with the realities and future projections of young women's lives, within the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts that shape their lives. These

***A high priority:
• complementary national, state/local policy initiatives and resources to investigate and support engagement with VETiS and ensuing career paths.***

***A basic necessity:
• collection of gender disaggregated national and state data for VETiS programs and related activities.***

It is time that girls and young women are freed from the jail of 'generic youth'.

gender-sensitive initiatives are required throughout national and state policies, data collection, implementation, monitoring and on-going evaluation of relevant VET programs for girls and young women. Further, longitudinal studies to track and link the pathways of girls and women from school through further studies and on into their labour market outcomes are critical.

At school and local levels, gender sensitive labour market training and further professional development are of central importance for all educators or counsellors involved in career (and subject selection) advice, work experience placements for girls, and/or the development and offering of vocational courses in schools. This extends to industry and employer representatives, given their increasing involvement in *VET in Schools* and work experience programs. In-service training is a priority for those who give career advice and must include relevant workplace information.

Moreover, it is essential that in the framing of such initiatives, critical cognisance of historical global/local gendered inequalities that continue to be reproduced must be addressed. This is doubly important, given the push for girls and young women to make choices around occupations and careers at ever earlier ages without understanding the implications of such choices in relation to their future economic well-being.

It would appear that, despite the rapid changes of the last two decades, and the rhetoric based on assumptions that 'girls have done/are doing well', old employment and labour market patterns could well be perpetuated and re/produced. This study highlights a (worrying) insight that more rigorous efforts to broaden and inform girls' career choices are still required. It could be argued that the gender neutral delivery of mainstream VET is erasing

an opportunity to inform girls and young women of the long-term gendered structural norms in occupations, industries and workplaces, including the implications of early decisions to move into feminised work areas may well have on their future careers and economic potential. Proactive gender specific policy initiatives and career education should be foundational to the planning and delivery of *VET in Schools*.

From a Canadian perspective, Fenwick (2004, p. 169) posits four directions for change, for girls. These are:

- more gender sensitive career education for girls
- sponsored vocational education for women
- management education in gendered issues arising in the changing economy
- critical vocational education in both schools and workplaces.

We support similar initiatives for development and implementation in Australia. This is especially important, given the current well-publicised skills shortages in the traditional masculinist trade areas, along with the establishment of a new brand of technical colleges, and the lack of success in either attracting or retaining a critical mass of girls or young women to such trade areas over the last two decades.

This research project, although described as small-scale, resonates strongly with issues that are much wider, for the economic well-being of girls and young women. It is now urgent that wider and deeper gender-sensitive research be conducted in this area. It is time that girls and young women are freed from the jail of 'generic youth'.

We argue that girls and young women should be active recipients of policy making and implementation that

support them. Rather than being the recipients of policy and practices that position young women in scenarios of contradictions and ambivalence relating to their vocational futures, *VET in Schools* must assist them in their ambitions to 'get real', ensuring that the choices made by girls and young women are fully informed choices. Implicit in this statement is the requirement that the VET system also needs to 'gets real' – girls and women comprise over half of its constituency.

What is needed are policies, pedagogies and practices that support girls and young women to fulfil their dreams, rather than setting them unknowingly on pathways that may well compromise their future economic well being.

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Endnotes

- 1 This article is a précis of findings from Butler, E. & Woolley, R. (Eds.) (2005). *Getting real? Girls and young women, working futures, VET and VET in schools*. Melbourne: Security4Women, the report of research conducted by WAVE and commissioned in 2004 by Security4Women (S4W), one of four secretariats funded through the Australian Government Office for Women (OFW). The full report can be located on the websites of WAVE (www.converse.com.au) and Security4Women (www.security4women.com).
- 2 The project was also a sub section of a larger Investigation in relation to lifelong work-related learning for women and girls. See the above websites for details.