



## GRADUATE WOMEN-NSW Inc

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### Submission to Australian Universities Accord

Graduate Women-NSW Inc. has as one of its main areas of focus a concern with government policies that have an impact on women and their education and wellbeing. Its scholarships and awards program supports women of all ages women to undertake university education, ranging from early undergraduate levels through to travelling scholarships for research students. Educated women are essential to a strong, cohesive and democratic society.

This submission will address questions of particular relevance to Graduate Women-NSW Inc. Q4 asks what national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focussed on meeting? From our perspective, a key challenge is **real equity for women**, especially those from vulnerable groups, including First Nations women, those living in regional and remote areas, those with carer responsibilities and older women for whom university education was not an option before.

We have expressed our concern in other places about the impact of the Job Ready Graduates scheme and its potential to discriminate against women, including First Nations women, and will comment further on this below.

**Pathways programs** which allow women without formal school leaving qualifications to develop skills and knowledge, especially through the TAFE system, are extremely valuable, giving a staged entry to post school education and through programs of articulation into university education. In our view, such programs **must be maintained and well supported financially**. In considering women in **vulnerable groups**, we would like to draw particular attention to those who are 'first-in-family'. Being '**first-in-family**', to consider finishing school and going on to tertiary education may provide a way to break a cycle of multi-generational disadvantage. Many women who are 'first in family', particularly those considering education in their middle years, lack social relations with women who have had a university education, suggesting the need for access to mentoring for these women. One group of 'first-in-family' women who are particularly important in a consideration of breaking the cycle of multi-generational disadvantage is those who have carer responsibility for children and teenagers; with support, **these women can become role models for the children within their care**, as they make changes to their own lives and circumstances.

Questions 15 and 16 are concerned with lifelong learning. It is a truism that lifelong learning is essential for the people of an innovative country. Lifelong learning does not necessarily comprise a multi-year plan of continuous and linked courses. Programs of short courses and micro-credentialling, whether through universities or TAFE, can be extremely valuable for women who

1921-2021 A century promoting women's education

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otherwise may not gain access to opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills. Yet, equally, many women's participation in programs that currently exist is inhibited by lack of money, lack of time, lack of social stability and conflicting priorities. This may suggest **the need for concessionary funding for places in short courses.**

Questions 20-22 concern the **pathways and links between TAFE and university.** Throughout this submission we have noted **the importance of these links** for women who did not have opportunities earlier to complete high school, or who could not continue to tertiary education at the time. We see strength in the diversity of the programs available. At the same, we are aware of the significance of having a program coordinator of some kind, who can act as a mentor, offering encouragement, stability and, through acting as a sounding board, providing an external perspective on the progress of these women. We would recommend that such a position be available in all TAFEs that offer 'return to study' programs.

In answer to Q28, we note that the women from vulnerable and under-represented groups who apply for scholarships and awards from Graduate Women-NSW Inc. emphasise the importance of three factors in supporting their engagement in tertiary education. As mentioned above, **access to a mentor or some form of peer support is very important.** Women from these groups are less likely to be familiar with the norms and standards and expectations of tertiary study, and have less experience in matching their own efforts and achievements against those of students from other backgrounds. The transition period is particularly crucial in helping students to adapt to the demands of study. Often for women, this means having family and friends adapt their expectations too. **The resources of time and money can be critical.** The possibility of **hybrid learning** has much to offer as it can minimise travel time in getting to and from classes; access to online resources and recordings of lectures available before tutorial class discussions can help students whose time for study is limited to prepare effectively for the time they do have available for formal learning. Start-up funding, for a suitable computer and access to the internet as well as textbooks and other learning resources, would also be invaluable in encouraging some women from under-represented groups. The restrictions imposed by COVID-19 showed the difficulties faced by some students at school and at university, but at the same time provided many examples of ways to overcome disadvantages.

Q31 asks how **the costs of participation** can be alleviated. To answer this question, we refer first to people who are **holders of temporary humanitarian visas.** It seems completely unfair that a person's 'right to education' expires after they leave high school. That is an unjust cost for an individual to bear, leaving them with a 'deficit' that potentially they can never re-pay; the deficit may be a debt in terms of a loan, but it can also be a deficit in terms of knowledge and skills forgone. Further, some humanitarian visa holders are required to pay upfront fees, rather than being eligible for HECS or other fee help schemes. This is a barrier to further education for all people holding these visas, but in many family situations, the priority is likely to be given to a son over a daughter. We have made reference in the answer to Q28 on how some costs might be alleviated. Our answer to Q49, below, provides another approach.

Q49 asks which aspects of the Jobs Ready Graduates package should be altered and which retained. We have expressed our concern with the JRG package in other submissions. A situation such as exists in Norway, where **education at public universities is free, would be ideal,** but the reality is that Australians are very unlikely to be willing to pay the level of taxes that would make that possible. Therefore, **we would argue that there should be a single rate of contribution regardless of field of study** (on the assumption that students

must make a contribution to their university education). We take this position on the basis that **every educated woman makes an equal contribution to a society**, one which goes beyond being “job ready” and that should not be measured in the economic terms that underpin the whole notion of JRG. Thus, acknowledging that student contribution will remain, and the well-documented contribution of educated women to a society, there should be a single rate of contribution, regardless of field.



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23 March 2023