

Queensland Women's Strategy

October 2021

Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this submission to inform the *Queensland Women's Strategy*.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic school authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 309 Catholic schools that educate more than 156,000 students in Queensland. Approximately 76,500 female students are currently educated and almost 16,000 female staff (76.6% of all staff) are employed in Catholic schools within Queensland.

QCEC supports the Queensland Government's commitment to advancing the rights and interests of women and girls and working to achieve gender equality in Queensland and welcomes the opportunity to comment on a new women's strategy which will build on the progress made under the Queensland Women's Strategy 2016–2021.

Significant Milestones 2016 – 2021: Pathways and Domestic and Family Violence

QCEC notes and welcomes the significant milestones, improvements and/or achievements in gender equality under the Queensland Women's Strategy 2016–21 including greater access to pathways plus greater insight into the impact of domestic and family violence.

QCEC notes the Increased opportunities for women to engage in typically male dominated academic and professional settings. Equitable access to career pathways is reflected in the appointment of women to senior leadership positions in many sectors including political, health and educational sectors.

Whilst this progress is commendable, it is suggested that the Queensland Women's Strategy 2016-2021 might have benefited from increased exposure, particularly among young women in the schooling sector.

COVID-19 Pandemic Learnings: Remote Learning and Access to Services

The impact of lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a compounding effect in that reduced access to schools, early education and day care facilities meant that women who retained their income source, were disproportionately faced with balancing home-based employment responsibilities simultaneously with caring responsibilities. This observation of the onus placed on women to navigate the care and educational needs of children during lockdowns was not limited to adult females but also applied to female school students who were, at times, tasked with supporting their siblings with remote learning. Across the board, the absence of adequate resourcing and most especially, access to

technology was aligned with increasing disparity. This disparity was most keenly felt by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds¹.

Catholic schools continue to seek to support marginalised students and families, with examples ranging from provision of technology during lockdowns and fee concessions throughout the pandemic, through to support for research into identification of the digital literacy skill required to access blended learning for those students.

For victims of domestic violence, COVID-19 potentially increased vulnerability within the home as reduced employment and financial uncertainty resulted in increased stressors upon the family unit. Research is now confirming anecdotal reports that women and children were more vulnerable to violence during this period in which specialised service providers were required to reduce or pivot their services². Additionally, for many children and young people, school is a safe place away from their lived reality of domestic and family violence. During lockdowns requiring remote learning, some of these children were unable to attend school (their safe place) in person. Catholic schools responded to this identified challenge by encouraging all vulnerable children (as well as children of essential workers) to attend school in person.

Addressing Gender Stereotype: Education

Attempts to address persistent gender stereotypes, inclusive of conscious and unconscious gender bias must span multiple domains of public and private lived experience. QCEC suggests that effective reform is likely to be underpinned through education. This education needs to address persistent gender stereotypes and biases across home, workplace, and community settings.

The next strategy should continue to support appropriate education on gender stereotypes during the early and primary years and not left to secondary school.

Data from 2019 Queensland Catholic education sector school leavers reflects some encouraging progress for female students. 2019 and 2021 NAPLAN data suggested that female students perform better than male students across all levels and domains except for numeracy. In addition, a larger percentage of female students achieved a Queensland Certification of Education in 2020, comparative with male students. Further, female students were more likely (comparative to male students) to identify a bachelor's degree or VET Certificate III or higher as their next step following graduation. However, gendered themes remain prevalent with female students (14.2 percent) more likely to study nursing when compared with male students (1.3 percent) and less likely to study electrical and electronic engineering and technology (7.0 percent male students comparative with 0.2 percent female students). Of students who were in paid employment, similar gendered themes emerged with female students (3.4 percent) more likely to be employed in childcare when compared with male students (0.4 percent) and less likely to be employed as an electrician (4.9 percent male students comparative with 0.1 percent female students) to point to just a few examples.

Vision for Women, Girls and Gender Equality in Queensland

Creating Positive Change: Legislation and Representation

A new Queensland Women's Strategy has potential to challenge gender inequality and create sustainable and meaningful change creating positive future opportunities for female students and staff members.

The most positive differences that a new Queensland Women's Strategy might make for women, girls and gender equality in Queensland would be enacting definitive, influential and sustained change grounded in policy and legislation. The new Queensland Women's Strategy must take a systemic

¹ [Australia's youth: COVID-19 and the impact on young people - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au)

² [Briefing-Paper-Issue-12-May-2021.pdf \(qut.edu.au\)](https://www.qut.edu.au)

approach to advancing safety, economic security, health and wellbeing and participation and leadership.

Role of the Queensland Government: Recognising Inequality and Reviewing Policy

The key role of the Queensland Government in addressing the needs of women and girls and driving gender equality is the capacity to invest resources in education, policies, and campaigns targeted at change. This would highlight the need for gender equality. Subsequently there is a need for ongoing reflection as to the impact of policies and legislation aimed at promoting women's safety, inclusion, and advancement across all domains of society. In terms of a specific example, the Queensland Government has led a review of consent and reporting as part of a review of respectful relationship education delivery within Queensland schools. The cross sectoral, collaborative approach to the consultation and review of respectful relationship education material has been encouraging and the QCEC eagerly awaits the release of revised material and resources for application within schools. The high level of engagement of Catholic sector staff within the extensive consultative forums reflects a genuine commitment to the safety and wellbeing of students and their families, coupled with a desire for additional support to deliver effective and targeted education in this space.

Achievements of Leading Queensland Women: Relatable and Visible

Celebrating and recognising the achievement of leading Queensland women serves to reposition exceptional achievement as imaginable and attainable for future generations of women. Increasing the visibility of successful women across a range of skill sets, but especially those from typically male dominated fields, would likely inspire school aged female students to reconceptualise their assumptions.

Celebrating female achievement across a greater spectrum of events and contexts need not diminish the importance of International Women's Day however, greater diversity when acknowledging successful women would likely provide specific examples, particularly for younger women.

Critical Factors to Best Drive Change

Supporting Communities and Individuals: Creating Spaces for Advocacy

In order to promote change aimed at increasing gender equality, it is proposed that school communities be supported to engage with targeted campaigns that challenge stereotypes. Within our schools, there are countless examples of advocacy as means to education, for example, recognition of White Ribbon Day, student attendance at [March4Justice](#) or support for programs such as [Strong Women Talking](#). In terms of the promotion of female leadership within schools, Catholic School Authorities have developed a range of programs, events and opportunities for female staff and students.

Supporting Industry and Workplaces: Evidence Based Resources and Celebrating Success

In the context of the education sector, recognising that education will remain at the core of efforts to promote change, the development of evidence-based resources would allow for wider engagement with policies and procedures that have already had some success. In addition, workplaces (such as schools) should be supported to celebrate instances in which equality has been achieved.

Supporting Men, Boys and All Genders: Connecting with Change and Challenging Norms

Ensuring that all genders support the ideal of gender equality, relies on the inclusion and dissemination of educational content pertaining to the use of inclusive, rather than marginalising, language via media campaigns across a range of platforms. There is a need to acknowledge the influence of social media and specifically pornography in the stereotyping, sexualisation and at times, dehumanisation of women. Catholic schools are mindful of the importance of attending to and reconceptualising language in all aspects of school life. Some schools have developed specific campaigns to address issues of language.

Ensuring Diversity of Female Voice: Examples of Effective Partnerships

Finally, there is a need to ensure diverse female voices are represented within this conversation. For example, young mothers struggle to continue to access education whilst also ensuring adequate care for their infant. Albert Park Flexible Learning Centre (managed by Edmund Rice Education Australia) provides an example of a Catholic school that offers child minding and playgroup support to young mums seeking to engage with high school education. Female students do not always have the financial means to access female sanitary items – an expense borne only by women and which can contribute to student absenteeism. The [partnership between the Queensland Government and Share the Dignity](#) provides an example of meaningful solutions in this space. Mentoring opportunities that are age, stage and culturally specific would ideally provide targeted and flexible support. Scholarships, particularly aimed at promoting inclusion and engagement in typically male dominated industries, designed to provide opportunities to underrepresented subgroups of women are to be promoted. Examples of such diversity scholarships are offered by the Australian Catholic University. Recognising that out of adversity comes opportunity, the voices of previously marginalised Queensland women represent untapped resources that the State can in the future capitalise upon.

Conclusion

This submission takes place amongst a pandemic which has demonstrated the interrelationship of humanity, notably the advantages for all when the most vulnerable members of our collective societies are adequately supported. QCEC is encouraged by the investment in a new Queensland Women's Strategy and is pleased to make this submission on behalf of the Queensland Catholic education sector. Should you wish to discuss any aspect of this submission, please contact Shannon O'Gorman, Education Officer.

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