

AFGW Triennial Report

2007 - 2010

PUTTING OUR MONEY WHERE OUR MOUTH IS:

The Education Programme of the Australian Federation of Graduate Women - AUD\$1.3m in 2007-2010 Triennium



From the Sense of Taste in Sharks and Rays to Quantum-Atom Optics, from Social and Environmentally Sustainable Livelihoods of Kenyan Women to the cute Pygmy Loris in the wild in Cambodia to Oratorio Festivals in the Crystal Palace – these are only a few of the university research projects supported by funds from the Australian Federation of Graduate Women (AFGW), a not-for-profit organization of women graduates that during the 2007- 2010 Triennium provided just over AUD\$1.3m for scholarships, grants and other funding to students across Australia and the South Pacific. Founded in 1922, AFGW has as one of its main goals the facilitating of women’s access to education in order to enable them to develop their personal intelligence and abilities and also to become active and informed participants in public life. The strategy for realizing that goal is the scholarship, bursary and prize program of the national body, the State and Territory Associations and Branches that make up the Federation.

Where does the money come from? The hard work and generosity of AFGW members! All Associations, Branches and the national body benefit from donations made by the members, either directly or through fund-raising functions. Bequests from past members are gratefully received, and in AFGW Victoria and New South Wales bequests are named after donors who are the major source of the funds. The other source of funds in the Associations have for many years been sequestration of part of membership dues. In the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, the academic dress-hiring services for university graduation ceremonies are central to fund-raising but put considerable demands on our volunteer labour. The annual amount of the individual awards may vary considerably between different sections of AFGW, with a range from \$100 to a \$74,250 and have totaled a massive \$230,000 in one year from just one State Association. There is no Association in the Federation that does not make a contribution. Here are all of the Association contributions during the three calendar years 2007 - 2009: AFGW \$27,450; AFUW-ACT \$6,000; AFGW-NSW \$90,160; AFUW-Vic \$70,350; AFUW-SA \$351,000; Graduate Women Qld \$685,000; AFUW-NT \$12,000; and AFUW- WA \$80,400.

(A detailed report of all projects during 2007-2009 is available by request or can be found on the AFGW Website: www.afgw.org.au)

In the larger Associations, the Scholarship funds are kept separate from general funds in some form of Trust or Foundation, and varying degrees of administrative separation exist: e.g. Graduate Women - Qld has a Fellowship Fund Branch which is separately incorporated. The Scholarship Secretary is responsible for the operation of the AFUW-Victoria Scholarship Program, supported by a sub-Committee of the central Committee. Separation is also ensured in the assessment processes by which scholarships are awarded, with independent panels set up to draw on the expertise and donated time and effort of members and, if appropriate, sympathetic and qualified non-members.

Is there still a need for scholarships and bursaries specifically for females? When asked in an audit of the scholarship programs, this question drew an emphatic 'Yes' from respondents. They pointed to the continuing under-representation of women in the upper ranks of the professions, the universities and business and in particular to the continuing gap in income between the sexes. Certainly the number of applications received and the gratitude expressed by recipients indicates that there are many women who experience the need for support. We noted in particular that older women, whether returning to higher education or entering it for the first time, generally found it difficult to attract funding, and our scholarships are not age-discriminatory, although AFGW does have an exemption from Equal Opportunity provisions relating to sex-specific awards.

Who gets these awards? Traditionally, most AFGW scholarships have been for postgraduate PhD or Masters degrees and they have been awarded on the criterion of academic merit, a position reflected in the fact that the earliest undergraduate scholarships offered were for students entering an Honours year of their degree course. Balancing merit against need has begun to become an issue, although only AFGW-Victoria has taken the position that disadvantage (widely defined) is a pre-requisite for all its awards, although this also applies to some South Australian awards. There has also been a shift in the nature of awards in response to changing patterns in university degrees and an awareness of the lack of financial support available for certain ways of continuing tertiary education, notably in the area of postgraduate diplomas and Masters by coursework.

The recognition of new areas of need, like the re-assessment of criteria, is one of the challenges of continuing relevance to be met by our scholarship programs, and indeed all our activities. Since the 1998 Conference on Indigenous education, AFGW has recognized a special need to involve Indigenous students in education at all levels. They are of course eligible to apply for any AFGW awards, but questions can be raised as to whether they do so from an equitable basis. For this reason some awards specifically for Indigenous women are offered in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria.

While only a handful of awards are restricted to specific disciplinary areas, the majority do have restrictions as to locality, with Associations offering scholarships to students graduating from or enrolling in a university within their particular state. The major scholarships supporting overseas study are the national AFGW Fellowship, some AFUW-Western Australia Bursaries and also can apply to the richly-endowed Freda Bage Fellowship of AFUW-Queensland, which is offered for a

three-year term, whereas other awards are annual. Tax deductible donations can only be made to funds established for awards to study in Australia by Australian citizens or permanent residents.

The majority of our scholarship funds, then, go to support Australians and the national education system, but members also recognize international obligations. While African poverty has drawn AFUW-South Australia's support for the Burundi Go Girls Appeal which provides high school education to orphaned girls, emphasis on our region has become strong: the AFUW-Australian Capital Territory Bursary is open to women from New Zealand, Papua-New Guinea or South Pacific countries; AFUW-Northern Territory offers 2 awards for Timor Leste women studying agriculture at the National University of Timor Lorosae; AFGW-New South Wales has recently sent \$1,000 to support education projects in Cambodia and \$300 pa to support a trainee teacher in Fiji; AFUW-Victoria is sending \$1,000 for 5 years for the rebuilding of a tsunami-destroyed school in Aceh and AFGW Inc contributes through donations to the IFUW Bina Roy to a Samoan project to provide dictionaries to all schoolchildren. The Sunshine Coast Branch of Graduate Women Qld supports local refugee women graduates and students through secondary education bursaries, assisting attendance at English language courses, arranging swimming lessons for Muslim girls, and has mentored a Hegg Hoffett Fund awardee from Ethiopia.

In 2009 Sunshine Coast Branch developed a new mentoring project, where trained volunteers offer support to women students undertaking honours and post- graduate studies at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Until the ideal world of universal access to affordable education arrives, AFGW is committed to easing the financial burden that many female students carry on their educational journey.

*Dr Jane Baker
President: Australian Federation of Graduate Women
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