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IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES?

Women in small business and VET

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Preface

This report investigates and discusses the literature on women business operators in order to augment the findings of research undertaken by Barrett (1997) and reported in *Women training for transitions: Enhancing vocational education and training for women's business involvement*. Barrett's work comprised a qualitative study of business owners investigating how vocational education and training (VET) had contributed to their success in operating their businesses. This report synthesises recent research on women in relation to business and VET, and raises implications for current policy directions.

An analysis of the literature on women small business operators and vocational education and training reveals a series of dilemmas for policy-makers within and around VET. The target group of this study—women small business operators—constitutes a difficult client group for VET provisions. In addition, both the nature and pace of change outside the VET system constitute another layer of complexity which must be addressed in the provision of courses and support.

The dilemmas requiring attention by policy-makers can be grouped into three areas, those:

i) concerned with the environment in which the VET system is now located
ii) relating to small business and its position within an increasingly industry-driven set of policy agendas
iii) relating to notions about equity (and especially gender equity) both external to and within VET

The matters addressed in the report are:

- globalisation, economic development and VET
- gender equity, vocational education and work
- small business, industry and women
- training and learning in small business
- user choice, small business and lifelong learning
- a conception of learning for small business
- policy directions for women in small business and VET

The report comprises four sections in all; an executive summary and three chapters that follow. The executive summary commences with key statements arising from the study, then an overview of the study before the findings are summarised more fully. The chapters in turn address context and policy overview, business in the Australian context, the VET system, and small business and women.

Executive summary

The aim of this report is to synthesise the findings of recent research to inform policy formation through a coherent and consistent gender analysis of the links between vocational education and training (VET) and small business. Women as small business operators are the focus of this report for the following reasons:

- most relevant research literature concentrates on women as small business operators
- over 90 per cent of all non-agricultural businesses in Australia are classified as 'small'
- women business operators are concentrated in the smaller enterprises
- the substantial increase in women's involvement as small business operators
- the current VET system is modeled around industry demands and those of large employers, making small and medium sized enterprises problematic in terms of where and how they 'fit'

The report builds on the findings of an earlier study (Barrett 1997) where the views of over 70 women business operators and their attitudes to, and experiences of, VET and its contribution to their business, were analysed. Barrett's findings are largely supported by recent research on small business generally and women in business specifically reviewed in this report.

Findings and issues for consideration

Misplaced policy focus and assumptions

Some focus and assumptions upon which policy for VET are premised appear misplaced and fail to offer practices likely to meet the needs of small business and, in particular, women in small business.

There is an apparent conflict between current policies relating to VET and those relating to employment. VET policy is quite deliberately passing responsibility for organising workforce training back to employers. At the same time, industrial relations policy is weakening the traditional (male) relationship between employers and employees. However, work is being organised in new ways where workers are responsible for their employment contracts and their ongoing training.

For instance, one reason small business is held to have lower levels of participation in VET training than large business, is the relative lack of employment tenure. This results in small business employers being reluctant to provide training for employees. They prefer to recruit trained people, or claim

that training is less important than attitude to work. By implication then, one wonders whether the erosion of traditional employer-employee relationships in large workplaces will also reinforce a reluctance to provide training. Such a situation would be completely at odds with policies aimed at employers taking a greater share of the responsibility for training.

Therefore, it is *recommended* that assumptions upon which VET policy is founded be premised on kinds of employment to which they are focussed. Small business needs are distinct from those of industry and large enterprises. In particular, assumptions need to be reviewed to fashion responses best suited to women in small business. For instance, instead of asking 'what sort of training do women business operators need', we should start asking 'what assistance/knowledge/ incentive do they need' and then identify the training, resources, networks and so on, required, and how these elements can complement each other. So far, most work focusses on the supposed solutions when we have not yet adequately defined the problem.

Challenging orthodoxies

The term 'industry' has come to mean the peak bodies for each industry sector, whose assigned role is to represent the interests of their members. However, just who those members are often remains unclear. Generally, small business operators do not participate in peak industry bodies (e.g. Barrett 1997; SAWAC [South Australian Women's Advisory Council] 1996). Sometimes they join the local chamber of commerce or a regional development board. We also know that women small business operators tend not to join anything at all, or when they do join they do not receive all the benefits of membership that are available to men. Also, not all small businesses fit into the delineations of industry as represented by industry peak bodies.

Small business is both a 'client' of the national VET system (as enterprise and industry) and constitutes a group of potential trainees—a problematic position in policy terms re take-up of training. However, the literature relating to training for 'small business' tends either not to differentiate between employer/ employee, or to use the terms interchangeably.

Traditionally, business has been conceptualised and analysed in terms of either number of employees or annual turnover. This sort of approach assumes universally accepted and understood business goals of profit generation and growth. From this has developed an orthodoxy about typical business life-cycle based on a linear progression from start-up through incremental growth, to stability and sometimes degeneration (or even occasionally, sudden death). The appropriateness and/or accuracy of this orthodoxy is not questioned in the literature. Similarly, it is accepted unproblematically as the 'norm' by VET policy-makers.

An Industry Commission report on small business employment (Revesz & Lattimore 1997) reveals that only a select number of small companies grow big enough to hire more staff. It also points out that staff in small businesses earn less than their big business counterparts (up to 20% less), that staff turnover is higher, less is spent on training and small firms are more likely to employ casual staff. The report cautions government about giving special help to the small business sector. However, this conclusion denies key concerns about women as self-employed within their own small businesses.

Indeed, a large proportion of small businesses never grows (and this does not just apply to those run by women). Research on women's participation in small business has extended our understanding of the sector and factors determining growth. This has largely been achieved through the work of Still and her associates in describing women's reality, rather than describing how it deviates from the accepted norm. From this, the potential for growth is linked not only to the state of the industry in which a business operates, its competitiveness and its ability to exploit new markets, but to the desires and lifestyle decisions of its owner/s. Consequently, federal and State/Territory government expectations that small business growth will lead to more jobs, (e.g. Australia 1997) are questionable.

Small business operators demonstrate deep ambivalence to VET training. Moreover, they demonstrate a preference for process oriented on-the-job learning. This is difficult to capture in a competency-based training package system that focusses on outcomes, not process. The paradox here is an old one for women—learning 'on-the-job' has inevitably resulted in non-recognised and non-accredited (and therefore often non-remunerated) learning. In a climate of high affirmation of credentials, this continues to be problematic and an ongoing challenge for VET policy-makers and providers.

Therefore, it is *recommended* that orthodoxy associated with the organisation of advice for assumptions about business practice and goals, and the positioning of small business as a client rather than a consumer of VET, be challenged.

Current policy, equity and small business

The more the VET system moves to a fully marketised model, the more pronounced are issues around gender/equity (see Barnett & Wilson 1995; Butler & Ferrier forthcoming), and the lack of congruence between the needs and everyday realities of women small business owners and training opportunities and outcomes available, is widened.

Women and other disadvantaged groups have usually been on the periphery of the training system, which has been largely designed for, and analysed in relation to, white male employees (usually in the manufacturing sector). That model is becoming increasingly irrelevant to most Australian workers and would-be workers. Marginal groups have always had to find alternative ways of negotiating the system. Even young people making the transition from school to work do not fit the prevailing model with its linear pathway from one to the other (Dwyer & Wyn [in Ferrier & Anderson 1998]).

This dilemma is sharpened further when we consider the focus of this report—that of vocational training for women who are owner-operators of their own businesses or their employees. Most of these businesses are located within feminised areas of the labour force. Thus, a layering of equity issues is apparent—both around gender, and also around the comparative disadvantage of small business to 'fit' into the policies, structure and culture of the VET system. It would appear that 'small business' has also been categorised as a special needs group.

Women's participation in VET has been characterised by their absence in trades training (at the same time their lower earnings were also linked to this phenomenon). The response within VET was to implement a range of activities to encourage girls to study subjects which would enable entry into the male-dominated areas, and to assist them to survive in the environment if they chose

to pursue the option. This response implies that the so-called 'norm' is acceptable, even desirable. Women's poor representation in certain occupations has always been approached in terms of identifying factors that keep them out. Yet, we know that there are many reasons why women find some of these occupations unattractive and even unpalatable. These include: the nature of the work itself, the way the work is organised, its location, and the alienation of working in a male dominated culture. The belief that encouraging sufficient women into these areas would provide a critical mass that could ultimately change things has not gained substance.

This approach continues to be the focus of much policy making. Mainstreaming, affirmative action, access and equity, have all focussed on forcing or encouraging women to move from where they are to where the men are—thereby supposedly fixing the problem. In reality, it has been eliminating the symptoms so as not to have to engage with the disease. This is the classic approach to a cultural dilemma articulated by Still and Mortimer (1994).

The same approach is now being taken to women in small business. First, identify the differences: women do not 'grow' their business. Then explain those phenomena in terms of certain deficiencies of women—lack of confidence, unwillingness to take risks and so on. So the system is reinforced as being 'all right' and the individuals are clearly the source of the problem. Other common differences cited about women in business are discussed in chapter 2—they work less hours, they do not employ people, they do not take risks, they are not 'hard-nosed' enough.

The women themselves are placed in a dilemma by this approach. Because explanations for the differences are unequivocally linked with being female—that is, they are (covertly) represented as character flaws; women feel they must deny their existence. Barrett's (1997) subjects insisted that they had not been disadvantaged in business by the fact that they were women (i.e. they didn't have these fundamental flaws), and yet when prompted they talked freely about incidents where they had been discriminated against because they were women. Hooper (1998) also reported this phenomenon.

Policy responses to 'difference' tend to be about 'helping' women to participate in a system that was not designed with their participation in mind. The presence of women in public spheres of activity constantly poses difficulties that tend to be resolved through strategies designed to accommodate women's participation with minimal disruption to the system itself. Still and Mortimer (1994) use the term 'cultural dilemma' to describe the inability of organisations to deal with women in management. In organisational terms, cultural dilemmas lead to the development of methods for including previously excluded individuals 'so that the dominant culture, or accepted ways of doing things, is not altered in any way' (Still & Mortimer 1994:3). Policy that seeks to incorporate women into an existing system without questioning the validity of the system in the first place uses exactly this approach.

A reliance on quantification hides the 'cultural dilemmas'. The qualitative approach has been particularly useful for articulating the reality of women's lives, and for understanding the complexity of negotiating male dominated structures and institutions. Quantitative studies can best gauge the degree of participation realised by women; however, qualitative analysis can indicate why. In their most simplistic forms, quantitative analysis indicates the scope of a phenomenon while qualitative analysis sheds light on its nature and causes.

Still and Timms (1998a) point out that many women starting businesses do so because they have rejected the status quo. Therefore, it is not enough to merely investigate difference from the point of view of eliminating it. Instead, it is time for some movement in the other direction. Rather than applaud those handful of businesswomen who 'make it in a man's world', and set them up as role models for the rest, perhaps we should be exploring how women do it differently and still survive. There has to be a serious investigation of why women-operated businesses have a better survival rate than those run by men. We do not know enough about how women plan and make financial decisions.

It is *recommended* that, for VET to become both accessible and more relevant to women, new understandings of their requirements and experiences need to be developed and incorporated into policy design. Moving away from 'taken for granted' conceptualisations of both 'small business' and 'women' (and ultimately the VET system itself) will assist the work necessary to inform such a paradigmatic shift.

Further, it is *recommended* that where a gender analysis is undertaken in research, the purpose not be to describe how women differ from the norm and to explain why this is the case. These kinds of explanations are based on generalisations (and sometimes unexamined assumptions) about women's experiences compared with men. For example, that women have child-care responsibilities, different workforce experiences, and that their socialisation affects their behaviour. Implicit in this approach is a belief that the problem is really about being a woman, not about the deficiencies of societal structures that do not recognise, let alone accommodate the real life experiences of a huge (and increasing) proportion of the population of interest.

Women, small business and VET provisions

Arising from the inappropriateness of the policy orientation and the cultural dilemmas identified above comes the need for approaches to organising VET for women in small business. New models are needed for lifelong learning and training in small business and for women business operators specifically. The following recommendations point to such approaches.

It is *recommended* that it is timely to switch the emphasis from learning styles and learning preferences to examine issues about juggling time and multiple roles of women small business operators. Given the 'time poverty' factor identified by Still and Timms (1998a), and the reality of small business owners' lives, issues beyond learning preferences have to be considered. In illuminating the difficulty associated with making space for learning while continually seeking to establish routine in a climate of perpetual change and challenge, research has identified different premises for learning arrangements. This need is made more urgent by findings that show women's unpaid work does not decrease when they enter paid employment (e.g. Bittman & Pixley 1997).

It is *recommended* that, given the precarious small business environment, commitment to training is more likely to be for a specific purpose than for achieving long-term goals.

Research also indicates that small business operators are much more likely to provide training if they have undertaken training themselves (Coopers & Lybrand 1994). Therefore, it is *recommended* that a first-stage effort directed at

small business owners would be sensible in assisting in the evolution and valuing of a learning culture in small business.

Further, it is *recommended* that the focus of VET effort be directed to approaches that meet women small business operators' needs. Field (1997) identified critical areas relating to learning in small business. These include the need to understand: (i) the influence of enterprise context on learning; (ii) whether and why knowledge or skill is valued; (iii) how they are utilised within the firm and (iv) how learning is transferred between individuals and systems both within and between enterprises; and (v) learning from and in networks. Further, the need for: (i) understanding the wide range of organisations and individuals with whom the small business interacts (e.g. customers, suppliers, industry associations, subcontractors) and (ii) considering their needs at a particular point in time. Together, these lead to an exploration of the nature of activities and trajectory of development within the business, as a basis for learning in and by small business employees and operators.

Furthermore, it is *recommended* that approaches to learning offered by Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Still and Timms (1998b) be considered. A direct link between ACE and training for work has been identified (Butler & Lawrence 1996, McIntyre & Kimberley 1998), despite popular beliefs the sector provides only recreational and leisure programs. ACE has long been used intensively by women. Small business attraction to ACE has been attributed to its local nature and its responsiveness to local needs. Further, Still and Timms' (1998b) *cellular model of women in small business* provides a model that avoids treating small business as a mini version of 'big business'.

1 Context and policy overview

Key issues

From the instigation of reforms a decade ago, the policy environment in Australia has been turbulent and one of constant change. The initial drivers of that change were primarily associated with globalisation (economic and cultural/political, including the increased power of Asian industrialising nations), technology, and new paradigms of government and governance both here and in other industrialised Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. Associated with these drivers of change, then as now, are shifting economic and industry trends including the mobility of capital globally, rapid developments in communications and information technologies, and associated changes to the nature of work and industrial relations (ANTA 1996).

The forces of the rhetoric and realities associated with globalisation now impact directly on the nature, organisation and distribution of both work, and work-related learning in this country. As a result, a whole range of activities has come to be seen as the legitimate domain of the economic agenda, including vocational education and training (VET). Not only that, but economic considerations are accorded primacy over others which have traditionally steered, or at least informed and shaped policy development. With increasingly neo-liberal approaches to economic development, and faith in the marketplace shaping federal government policies, strategies to enhance economic development are situated alongside a withdrawal from the welfare state, and a rapidly diminishing public sector.

Like education and training, industrial relations have also become linked to economic rationalism and the ideology of 'the market' than ever before. This, in part, is a result of emerging globalisation but it also reflects an ideological agenda. For some years now the key words in industrial relations have been 'flexibility' and 'productivity'.

With the emphasis on major industry/big business and packaged training based on defined and therefore time locked skills, many of the 'users' (existing and potential) of the training products now available are required to somehow fit into a system of delivery described as 'flexible' and based on user choice. This challenge is of significance for small businesses in general and women in particular. Both groups have been marginalised as key stakeholders; both are firmly centred in the locus of turbulent change occurring in work; both offer new insights to a future in which the ability to respond rapidly and creatively to change will intensify.

Small business has, for the past decade, been viewed politically as central to economic development and increasing employment opportunities in this country. The focus on small business as a vehicle for economic development is closely allied with political/economic issues and a perceived potential for job creation (both in encouraging small businesses to expand enough to start employing, and encouraging unemployed people to buy or create jobs).

Globalisation

At this time in late 20th century history, one of the most called upon terms is that of 'globalisation'. Although the word is used widely, and is contested, Wiseman (1996) argues that globalisation is used as a shorthand term for expressing belief in the accession of global corporate power and the inevitability of a globalised economy. In Australia, the concept of globalisation has, with 'enormous and uncritical enthusiasm by business, management and human resource management researchers and practitioners' (Hall & Harley 1995, p.71), been embraced by government/s, politicians and senior bureaucrats (Sklair 1996). One of the key features associated with this phenomenon is that of global economic competitiveness, based on the ideology of neo-liberalism (or economic rationalism) and enacted through international and State policies and restructured labour forces located in a so-called globalised, trans-national and technologised marketplace.

A key feature is the adoption of policy measures designed to ensure a skilled and globally competitive workforce through education and training initiatives in line with directions promoted by global organisations including the OECD, the World Bank, United Nations and the European Union (EU). The privileging of both the rhetoric and the policy initiatives of such key global agencies by industrialised countries has also established what is described as a global policy community (Taylor et al. 1997).

The force of the rhetoric and the realities associated with globalisation now impact directly on the nature, organisation, and distribution of both work, and work-related learning in this country. Education and training are portrayed both as the problem—contributing to the non-achievement of a mobile, flexible and skilled labour force—as well as the means by which the nation can achieve its potential on the global stage (Butler 1998a). Indeed, globalisation, and the rhetoric associated with economic globalisation, is what is most often offered up as the justification for sweeping changes in both work and vocationally-oriented education and training. In this way, globalisation is depicted as beyond the intervention of nation states, as immutable and offering little if any choice, either to governments or individuals. It is assumed that business, large or small, is both in favour of and will benefit from economic globalisation, provided it has the capacity to operate within (often untested) frameworks designated as most appropriate for international competitiveness.

Given the acceptance of globalisation in Australia by both the previous and present federal governments, any consideration of policy for and systems related to industry or 'business' (large or small) and education for work-related learning must now situate itself within this broader context, and consider the implications inherent in such a scenario. However, it is essential that analysis be conducted from a critical rather that descriptive perspective. For example, current research is now illustrating that globalisation has offered few if any benefits to Australian workers (e.g. Hamilton 1996), that the attention paid to issues of equity are minimal (e.g. Butler 1997a).

Economic development

Small business has, for the past decade, been viewed politically as central to economic development and increasing employment opportunities in this country. The overall goal of economic policy under the federal Howard Coalition

Government is set out in the opening pages of the document *Investing for growth* (1997). Its stated aim is to deliver 'stronger sustainable growth, higher productivity, expanding opportunities and rising living standards' (p.3). In pursuit of this goal, a whole range of activity has come to be seen as the legitimate domain of the economic agenda. Not only that, but economic considerations are accorded primacy over others which have traditionally steered, or at least informed and shaped policy development.

Within the context of building 'a policy framework which enables Australian businesses to develop and expand, to compete more effectively and to provide more jobs' (*Investing for growth*, p.3) education has become a means of maximising the contribution of human capital in the process of wealth creation. It is a commodity that adds value to the life chances of those individuals who have it and which is seen as facilitating the achievement of economic goals.

While there is some recognition that economic development occurs at various locations or levels—i.e. global, national, State, regional, local—there appears to be little attention paid to the particularities of these sites. Local economies depend more on co-operation than competition. The factors necessary for their survival are often at odds with State or national priorities, and their survival often depends on strategic alliances which may not fit with text book ideas about good business practice. So too, small business priorities and concerns do not always match up with those of large enterprises or industry. Childs (1997) points out that small businesses even have different local and regional relationships than large ones. Small business prospects are linked with those of other small businesses in the local area, whereas the economic well-being of large enterprises is more tied up with 'the share market, global economic trends and solutions to management problems and industrial relations . . . than it is to the economic well-being of the region within which it is located' (Childs 1997, p.23).

Industry restructuring

The first wave of activity in relation to rebuilding the national economy began over a decade ago with the restructuring of Australian industry and industrial awards. With the then emphasis on competitiveness in world markets, efficiency and profit maximisation, industry restructuring has brought about sweeping changes to the Australian cultural and economic landscape. Industries in general, and enterprises and workplaces specifically, continue to undergo radical reshaping through downsizing, 'right sizing', privatisation, outsourcing and so on. Flexible work practices and multiskilling are seen as the norm.

Changes associated with restructuring included but were not limited to how businesses interacted with one another and with the State. A great deal of emphasis was also placed on how individual enterprises did what they did. The Structural Efficiency Principle (SEP) was the first of a series of measures designed to bring about changes in both work processes and workforce organisation. The decade since the introduction of the SEP has been characterised by constant change, starting with award restructuring in the late 1980s and a subsequent series of changes to the relationship between employers and employees. Within a climate of economic rationalism, large employers, designated as 'industry', have been accorded both increased political status by the State, and increased power and authority within the industrial arena.

The changing nature of work

Changes during the past decade to both how work is organised and employer-employee relationships, will continue to challenge our notions of work well into the next century. Traditional notions of career paths and permanent employment are two cases in point. Fast disappearing with those are notions of mutual trust and loyalty, security, and reward for 'hard work'. The emergent pattern is more and more that associated with 'post-industrialism' or post-Fordism—a small core of permanent workers, and an increasing number of peripheral (part-time, casualised, marginal and precarious) workers. Core workers are often described as 'knowledge' workers, experiencing both work intensification and extension of working hours. Their workplaces are often described as 'learning organisations'.

Individuals are increasingly being expected to chart their own course through the world of work, take responsibility for their own work-related learning and training, and negotiate their own conditions and rewards. At the same time, periods of unemployment (and sometimes very long periods of unemployment) are predicted to be a fact of life for many and are already a reality for many young people (e.g. Watts & Hubbard 1996, Dusseldorp Skills Forum et al. 1998). Moreover, 'assumptions about appropriate gender roles play a most significant role in shaping the new patterns of work, and . . . such assumptions are becoming increasingly differentiated across class lines' (Probert 1997, p.5). Further radical changes to the nature and organisation of work are directly connected to the increasing withdrawal of the State from welfare provision, and the rapid privatisation, downsizing and outsourcing associated with both public and private employment activity.

In effect, many people who in the past would have been employees (particularly in large private enterprises or in the public sector), are now being classified as self-employed either by necessity or by choice. Such people now represent a large proportion of the rapid small business sector growth in recent years. Another trend is the increased activity of labour hire companies—businesses that 'broker' employment for specific jobs and set periods of time.

In its labour force projections to the year 2005, the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) (formerly called the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs [DEETYA]) predicts a changing composition of the workforce which will include greater participation by women, a general middle-ageing of the workforce, and more part-time work (Australia, DEETYA 1995, p.3). The increase in service sector activities, the growth of casualised employment, the (rhetorical) valuing of skills such as communications, teamwork, collaboration and the high participation of women in the labour force all contribute to a trend described as the 'feminisation' of work. However, VET and industry policy has taken little notice of this trend, and continues to be reactive rather than proactive in meeting the training requirements of this rapidly changing world of work.

Industrial relations

Like education and training, industrial relations have also reflected the emergence of economic rationalism and the ideology of 'the market'. This, in part, is a result of globalisation but it also reflects an ideological agenda. Since the introduction over a decade ago of the Structural Efficiency Principle, trade unions effectively have had their resources tied up responding to an increasingly employer-driven agenda of workplace change linked to broader economic change.

For some years now the key words in industrial relations have been 'flexibility' and 'productivity'. Employers continue to argue that in order to be competitive in the global economy, they need to have the flexibility to organise their workforces in a way which matches and preferably enhances their business operations. As a result, there have been substantial changes to the way work is organised. These changes have resulted in changes across the whole range of employment conditions from wages, to hours of work and the nature of contracts of employment.

The rhetoric of efficiency and productivity through flexibility has claimed that work processes should be the subject of scrutiny. Where work processes offer little scope for 'improvement' especially by the introduction of new technologies, the trend has been to intensify the amount of work done by any one person. When intensification reaches its limits, then workforce shedding (including downsizing or 'rightsizing') becomes the focus of attention. In Australia, the rhetoric originated in the metals sector of manufacturing, but it follows trends in the United Kingdom and United States driven by productivity goals. Its application in other industries has always been problematic.

That small businesses tend to be under-unionised is well known. Moreover, given their size, small business operators and their employees have by necessity long engaged in 'flexible' (and sometimes exploitative) work practices. While such practices are most often negotiated in the workplace in an informal manner, and without the support (or intervention) of unions, a number of tensions exist around employer/operator benefits and employee benefits/trade-offs. One such trade-off here may well be the balance between workplace learning (learning on-the-job) and formally recognised and accredited training, linked to levels of skills and to pay. This may also mean that 'new' ways of organising work which are designed to deliver competitive advantage may have no potential to benefit small business because they have already been 'unofficially' utilised for many years.

Another aspect of this situation is raised by White (1997) in relation to young workers. He contends that young people are particularly vulnerable in precarious employment situations and warns 'a substantial growth in the shadow or underground economy can be anticipated in the years to come with the transfer of much production activity to small businesses as part of contracting out by governments and larger companies, and the needs of young workers to attain income from any source possible' (White 1997, p.77). White claims that there is a cultural climate within the small business sector which makes exploitation inevitable, indeed 'natural' under the circumstances in which they operate.

Encouraging small business growth

In addition to establishing a pro-business political climate, Australian federal and State governments have actively targetted increasing the overall number of small businesses as a major area of economic policy. The federal Coalition Government has set a target of creating 40 000 new small businesses in 1998 (Australia 1997). Such a move, while rhetorically recognising the significance of small business in the Australian economy, is also devised with the intent of creating jobs within a persistently high national unemployment rate.

This strategy fails to recognise the volatility of the small business sector. Collins et al. (1995) describe it as a 'dicey, devouring game' (p.27) with high casualty rates. They note, along with Childs (1997) that in this sector the possibility of bankruptcy is a daily reality which in many respects is beyond the control of the

small business operator: 'Local businesses which have operated successfully . . . can be wiped out in months once large organisations decide to move in . . . All the training in the world cannot compete with cost-cutting practices of multinationals . . .' (Childs 1997, p.17)

At the same time, the notion of small businesses being well placed to create and/or optimise so called niche markets is an idea that continues to attract popular attention. The idea of niche markets is seen to offer both employment potential and to increase the status of 'small' businesses in local/global consumer/service-oriented marketplaces. This concept assumes the ability of small business owners and a supply of skilled employees to reorient quickly and seize opportunities. Also explicit in this emerging trend is the presence of training provision that is proactive, relevant, and able to keep pace with the flexibility and changing skill requirements necessary to capitalise on opportunities.

Vocational education and training

The shifting of the education system away from being a fundamental building block of society and culture and towards being a vital component of the economy and so the marketplace, occurred as part of the shift to globalisation discussed in a previous section.

Marginson (1997a) asserts that the marketisation (or commodification) of education in Australia, as in other OECD countries, needs to be understood within the context of major developments of our time, including the withdrawal of the State from public service and welfare provision, the shifts in labour markets eroding long accepted patterns of relative security and reforms associated with 'new' managerialism. This commodification of education results in access (or not) to education as a 'positional good' within an increasingly competitive environment. Further, the marketisation of education shifts the relationship between education and citizen-forming strategies (Marginson 1997b), at a time when links between work and citizenship are also being transformed. For example, as Taylor et al. (1997) point out, a major effect of moving education out of the public sector and into the market, is that individual students come to be viewed as consumers rather than citizens.

Education in Australia is now positioned as the vehicle for maximising human potential in an economic rather than a social sense (Marginson 1997a, 1997b). Nowhere is this ideological approach more obvious in the education sector than the areas of activity designated as VET.

The policy environment—VET, women and small business

The past decade has witnessed what can be described as a change in relation to the assumptions underlying education and training in this country. This has been heavily influenced by policy initiatives promoted by the global policy community discussed earlier, and subsequent practices in other OECD countries. A series of sweeping reforms in education, be it education in the compulsory (school-based) sector or post-compulsory sectors, including VET, adult and community education (ACE) or (to a lesser extent) education in universities, has changed perceptions regarding the goals of education, linking it more closely to the world of work. Boundaries between the different sectors of education have become sites of continual (re)negotiation, as have understandings about

curriculum and pedagogies. This change has also been described as the 're-norming' of education in Australia (Seddon et al. 1996), and is part of the plans to establish Australia as an internationally competitive 'clever country'.

Central to this change are shifts in ideologies and in balances of power, including who (and how and why) are considered to be 'key stakeholders'—representatives and individuals who wield considerable power in key decision-making forums about the structure, scope, policies and processes of VET. Further, such decision-making must also take account of federal/State relationships and differences in the Australian context, especially when considering policy development for a national VET system.

These changes have also been located in a climate of on-going high levels of unemployment (8–10%) and especially youth unemployment, and the linking of labour market programs and, more recently, unemployment benefits with training for work. These pressures can be closely linked with the high degree of attention (and expectations) focussed on initiatives for entry-level training, especially through the New Apprenticeship System (NAS).

Within this framework, decisions were made that placed and continue to privilege industry leaders as the most powerful group of key stakeholders in the Australian VET system and so policy environment. This privileging of industry is associated with the marginalisation of educators, and thus, to a large degree, the knowledge and experience that such organisations and specialists could offer in a pro-active way. New relationships were established between the State, industry, and until recently, unions, in the design and implementation of the national VET system. A new bureaucracy (ANTA) was established, as was an industry around training provision, within a quasi-market framework.

Gender equity, vocational education and training and work

When considering approaches to vocational education and training for women in business, three areas of activity converge—policy approaches and practices in relation to equity in general and gender equity specifically; how such policies and practices are applied in VET and in work; and what the outcomes are for women of such interventions.

In Australia, the dominant approach to equity is a legislative one, especially through national and State legal requirements in relation to equal opportunity (EO), equal employment opportunity (EEO) and affirmative action (AA), and also through Acts such as the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA). In the main, such legislation, which is overwhelmingly complaints-based, provides a bottom line for expectations of equity and social justice for citizens in workplaces and in the practices of everyday life.

This approach is best described as a distributive approach to justice, rather than substantive. In seeking to 'distribute' benefits (such as training) in a so-called equitable manner, it relies on the categorisation of people into seemingly homogenous groupings (women, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, indigenous peoples, the disabled and so on) described as disadvantaged, target or special needs groups. While such an approach has provided an educative platform about the need for social justice and a framework for appropriate/non-appropriate behaviours, as well as a mechanism for seeking rights through a legislative requirements/complaints-based process, it is limited in a number of ways. First, it obscures the differences between people classified

within the groups. It also hides the effects of compound disadvantage—where a person 'belongs' to more than one group. It sets such groups in competition with each other, often for minimal resources. Most importantly, the 'target group' approach obscures just who gains or is advantaged within any policy framework or system. These limitations are exacerbated in any system that utilises the 'target group' approach to equity as an add-on to policy and systems design, rather than an central organising feature (Butler 1997a, 1998a).

Although the national vocational education and training system (NVETS) is relatively new (1992), its antecedents are a long-standing masculinised approach to ideas about work (who works where, what is men's work and women's work, high status/skilled and low status/unskilled work, work in the public domain or the private/domestic domain), and how people are trained for work. VET in Australia was originally designed primarily around specified and longstanding 'trades', where young men undertook apprenticeships in a range of trade areas, with specified and hierarchical skills frameworks linking closely to prevailing practices in industry. In contrast, most of the training in areas where women worked was on-the-job (sitting next to Nellie), considered low skilled (skills that were/are 'natural' attributes associated with femaleness), and rarely accredited (Butler & Connole 1992).

With the implementation of first the national training reform agenda (NTRA), and then later NVETS, women were cautiously optimistic that this tripartite (government, industry, unions) intervention, closely linking work and training, offered scope for some equity gains. It was envisaged that advances in a number of areas should be possible—recognition of women's work (by defining areas where women workers tend to cluster, such as community services and health, clerical and administrative work, retailing as 'industry'); naming and recognition of skills (competencies) associated with this work; recognition of prior learning ; the availability of accredited nationally recognised training and eventually pay equity. While some gains have been made, the cautious optimism of a decade ago has not been realised in any substantial way (Butler 1997b).

2 Small business and VET in the Australian context

This section explores the position of women as small business operators in Australia, and draws out some of the factors which continue to constitute women as a disadvantaged group in relation to the VET system.

Key issues

In reviewing the literature a certain consistency in the findings was noted, indicating perhaps that popular beliefs about small business in general and women in business in particular have gone unchallenged. A similar reluctance on the part of VET policy-makers and providers to challenge how training is conceptualised and therefore delivered, has also been raised. This lack of challenge has implications for how policy questions or 'problems' are framed and then addressed.

In addition, little gender analysis is undertaken as an integral part of research. As with policy pertaining to women, gender analysis tends to be an add-on rather than a central driving feature of research design. Because of this, knowledge about women operating small businesses remains patchy.

While there is consensus about some of the characteristics of white, well-educated and middle class women business operators, there is little definitive information about other groups of women. Roffey et al. (1996) rightly point out that 'the category "women" needs to be recognised as a concept accommodating considerable differences across cultural background, socio-economic status and family structure, and research needs to be routinely cognisant of such differences when drawing generalisable conclusions'.

Comparative analysis (i.e. on the basis of other demographic variables such as ethnicity, place of residence etc.) within the category of women, is still very difficult. Largely this is due to the sampling issues discussed later in this section. Until the general failure to routinely collect reliable data and undertake effective gender analysis in quantitative (and qualitative) research is overcome, our understanding will remain incomplete and insubstantial or at least difficult to analyse.

Surveys conducted over the past ten years give a variety of information about women in small business. While there is some consistency in the figures, there are also indicators of rapid and widespread change. This suggests that the small business sector is highly volatile, which is in stark contrast to the impression of stability created discursively in many documents.

Women have never been 'typical' employees in terms of any of the standard work characteristics. They are concentrated in particular jobs and industries, they are more likely to be part-time or casual employees than men, and their average earnings have always been lower than those of men. Women small business operators are even further from the norm.

A new paradigm for thinking about women's small business endeavour is required. This needs to take account of both lifestyle and business motivations and aspirations. Furthermore, it needs to be situated in the real experiences of women operating small businesses. Finally, it needs to focus on the complete picture for women, rather than being limited to where and how women differ from men.

As Still and Timms (1998a) point out, women become business operators for a range of reasons. Two prevailing factors in women's lives—'time poverty' and the 'culture of advantage', need to be taken into account if policy-making is to be effective and relevant. Time poverty arises out of working women being burdened with a greater share of the domestic workload than men, and the culture of advantage is the phenomenon whereby what is generally considered to be 'male' ways of doing things are seen as the norm and are thereby given status over viable or even preferable alternatives.

Learning and training in small business fail to take account of the reality of small business operations versus large business or 'industry'. A general criticism of small business management courses is that they tend to be adapted versions of big business management theory and practice.

Although small business management training is currently available in a variety of delivery modes, research indicates more attention needs to be paid to content and the context of small business operations. In addition, much of the literature focusses on management training as if it were the only type of training needed in the sector. Some researchers even contend that employment in small business is not skilled work and therefore training is not required. Assumptions such as this need to be examined in the light of current economic developments as overseas literature indicates that success in small business depends very much on being able to harness skills in a rapidly changing environment.

Other issues which emerged in the literature review centred on the difference between training and learning, with some researchers contending that the boundaries between learning for work, VET, and informal learning at work are very blurred. Popular descriptors of training emphasising the site of training (i.e. 'on' or 'off' the job) exacerbate this blurring because they do not easily accommodate learning as a part of everyday activity.

Small business is seen to have a particular set of attitudes to knowledge and learning. These centre on a lower level of satisfaction with VET, particular requirements about content and process, and poorer knowledge of, access to, and influence over the VET system than large employers. In addition, there is conflicting evidence about both the effect of costs in the take up of training by small businesses, and in preferences for content and delivery of training packages.

Research findings indicate that small business operators are ambivalent about VET training. Moreover, they illustrate a preference for process-oriented on-the-job training (or learning). This is difficult to capture in a competency-based training package system that focusses on outcomes, not process. Given both these factors, 'quick fix' solutions which focus on isolated aspects of the misfit between current VET policies and practices, and the perceptions and needs of small business will do little if anything to address the problem.

Another research gap in relation to VET for employees in small businesses is data relating to how small business employers access skills. When hiring staff, do they seek experienced workers, absolute beginners to train, people with skills

to complement or supplement their own, or are attitude and motivation all important? (See for example Coopers & Lybrand 1994.) The research which has investigated these questions has produced conflicting results and more needs to be understood in this area.

Given the diversity of the small business sector, it is questionable whether the VET system as it currently exists is able to cope with a group of individuals who are responsible for their own skills development, and yet who often have little time or autonomy in their working lives. The diversity of the sector is also related to the fact that many small business operators are exploring new ways of doing business. Traditional models of manufacturing, trade, commerce and service delivery are not appropriate to many emerging small businesses. Assumptions cannot be made that the business lifecycle is linear, or even that it will inevitably go through certain stages. All of that is currently being challenged by the women (and men) who are entering and operating in this sector for a whole range of reasons.

Introduction

In conjunction with the present federal Coalition Government's increasing interest in small business as a vehicle for delivering economic growth and jobs, there has been a corresponding increase in research on small businesses and how they operate. Some of that additional research has been driven by concerns about equity (e.g. Barnett 1993; Barnett & Wilson 1995; SA WAC 1996; Still 1993; Still et al. 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1998b), some has focussed on the need to market goods and services to small business (e.g. Barrera & Robertson 1996; Coopers & Lybrand 1994; Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business & Industry 1996; Western Australian Department of Training 1996; *Yellow Pages* Australia 1996) and some attempts to explain both the cause and impact of the societal changes associated with globalisation and the growth of the small business sector (Bureau of Industry Economics 1991; Ferrier & Anderson 1998; Field 1997; Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills 1995a/b).

Current research employs a range of methodological approaches covering the spectrum from qualitative to quantitative and combinations thereof. Not surprisingly, the quantitative research tends to be market-driven while the qualitative work arises out of more investigative social inquiry. There are exceptions to this of course. However, the predominance of this pattern overall means that the quantitative work rarely addresses the so-called 'soft' issues and the work which does focus on the more slippery issues rarely produces statistically reliable results. The latter trend results in a difficulty to apply findings beyond the actual research projects in case. An inherent danger in this is that although researchers do not claim their findings are representative, they are often treated as such.

Existing literature reviews

Several comprehensive literature reviews have been undertaken in recent years which cover the areas of women and small business and women and training. The most notable recent publication is *Women in small business: A review of research* by Roffey et al. (1996) undertaken for the Department of Industry, Science and Tourism. Gibb (1997) conducted another stand-alone review of the literature for the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

Many research reports also contain substantial reviews of the literature. These can be found in ANTA (1997a); Bureau of Industry Economics (1991); Coopers & Lybrand (1995a); Revesz and Lattimore (1997); SA WAC (1996); Wolcott (1996); and *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996).

The Roffey et al. (1996) report notes the limitations of empirical research, observing that analysis is often limited to the use of descriptive statistics. It also identifies a 'preponderance of cross-sectional surveys and convenience samples (which) highlights the need to develop comprehensive database sample frames and national longitudinal data, which includes diversities of region, size, sector, structure and ethnicity' (Roffey et al. 1996, p.67).

Consistency or 'sameness' in findings

There is a consistency of findings in the literature—mainly due to the way the issues are conceptualised and reproduced by researchers. The result is that a particular type of 'group think' pervades the literature. Part of that 'group think' contains implicit assumptions about a whole range of issues: that growth in business is a desirable goal; that if business decisions are not based solely on economic considerations, then they are not strategic; the barriers that women experience in public life are related to their gender and the expectations contained therein, not to societal structures and institutions.

These sorts of views are widely held and rarely challenged. Where small business research highlights possible inconsistencies with the accepted wisdom, findings are subject to reliability issues (usually because of sampling techniques), unsubstantiated assumptions about the causes of those inconsistencies, and also to the fact that surveys often focus on people's intentions (e.g. intention to expand the business, intention to train, intention to employ), and reporting of these is known to be notoriously unreliable.

The types of assumptions which produce a sameness in research findings also pervade policy documents and implementation strategies. They affect the way 'problems' are defined and addressed. This issue is taken up by Bacchi (1998) and Taylor et al. (1997) in relation to policy development. While Taylor et al. (1997) suggest policy analysis needs to investigate the three areas of context, text, and consequences, Bacchi suggests that policy analysis needs to begin by asking the question, what's the problem? She asserts that policy represents problems in very specific ways which actually constitute 'the shape of the issues to be considered' (Bacchi 1998, p.11). The authors concur with these insights, and suggest the taking up of such ideas by those responsible for both policy analysis and policy development in the areas covered by women, small business and the provision of VET. Such a stance would go some way to counteracting the 'group think' approach evident in the review of the literature in this field.

Gender and quantitative data

The major quantitative data sources about both business, and education and training, are provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and other large scale sample surveys and data collection exercises. Unfortunately, gender analysis tends not to be a routine part of reports produced from these and data collection does not always include the sex of the respondent as a variable. Occasionally, special reports are released about women (e.g. ABS 1997b; Roffey et al. 1996; *Yellow Pages* Australia 1996).

A major shortcoming of much of the smaller scale empirical research which exists is reliability. Much of it is hampered by unrepresentative samples, or samples which are too small, and/or have too low a response rate. This then has repercussions for the ability of researchers to say anything useful about women and men in general, let alone particular sub-categories of those groupings (i.e. on the basis of ethnicity, age and so on). As a result, most of what we know about women in small business is about Anglo–Australian middle class women. This is discussed further in the section dealing with characteristics of women small business operators (see page 17).

Where sampling methodology and sufficient response rates do allow analysis by gender, this is often not undertaken at all and rarely, if ever, undertaken from a feminist perspective. This failure of researchers to undertake a gender analysis is not confined to small business and VET. Pocock (1997, p.1) notes that research approaches in industrial relations 'are constrained and perverted by the failure to treat gender effectively'. She goes on to add that 'naming . . . gender or "race" as simply too complex to analyse, is to give convenient continuity to a gender blindness that undermines the quality of research' (p.14). According to Pocock, when gender analysis is undertaken, it is often confined to an analysis of women as occupying a position of disadvantage and/or exclusion. She argues that gender analysis needs to investigate both men and women, advantage and disadvantage, power and lack of power. Finally, she suggests that unless gender analysis concentrates on the social rather than the biological, and is applied equally to men and women as broad groups (albeit containing enormous diversity), 'concepts like male advantage and resistance to women remain out of view and unchallenged' (p.7).

Small business in Australia in overview

According to the ABS report *Small business in Australia* (ABS 1995c), just over half of all private sector employment is provided by small businesses and these in turn account for around 97 per cent of all private sector businesses. When agricultural businesses are excluded from the figures, small business still accounts for 90 per cent of all businesses, and provides 49 per cent of private sector employment. However, over half (54%) of all small businesses have no employees.

In 1995–96 small businesses contributed 57 per cent to total job generation (compared with 28% for medium business and 14% for large business). They also contributed 56 per cent to total job destruction (ABS 1995a). Over half (54%) of the small business employment generation was attributed to new businesses.

February 1997 ABS figures just released and reported in *The Age* newspaper (Gittens 1998, p.4) provide the following estimates about small business:

- 46 per cent of small businesses have no employees
- 58 per cent are home-based
- one third function with only one operator
- only 16 per cent have five or more employees

These more recent figures suggest substantial changes to the small business landscape over a two-year period. Among other changes they indicate a startlingly higher proportion of small businesses with employees and a higher proportion that are home-based than previously. This suggests that the small business sector is highly volatile, which is in stark contrast to the impression of

stability which is created discursively in many documents. This is achieved by reporting figures on new small businesses without reporting figures on small business closures, referring to new jobs without referring to job losses over the same period. Net figures are rarely mentioned in literature pertaining to small business—thus often creating the impression of steady uninterrupted growth.

Moreover, the findings do not indicate why such changes in the small business landscape occur nor what impact this has on particular groups within the category 'small business', including concurrent transformations in contemporary social structures.

The exclusion of agricultural businesses from the ABS definition of 'small business' is also problematic—particularly for women. Research conducted in rural areas (Barrera & Robertson 1996; Butler & Lawrence 1996; SA WAC 1996) reveals a large number of spousal partnerships in the agricultural sector. Excluding these businesses from the official figures means that the full extent of small business activity is not being presented. This exclusion could be much more significant for women than it is for men.

How businesses are categorised

Small business has traditionally been defined by the ABS as being businesses with less than 20 employees, except in manufacturing where a small business is considered to be one which has less than 100 employees. Following recent growing interest in the role of small business in the economy, further categories of businesses based on employment size have emerged:

- own account workers or self-employed (an owner/operator with no employees)
- micro-business (employing less than five people)
- other small business (employing between five and 19 people inclusive)
- small business (employing less than 20 people)
- medium business (employing between 20 and 199 people inclusive)
- large business (employing 200 people or more)

(ABS 1996)

Such differentiation begins to illustrate the diversity of ways 'small business' can be conceptualised.

To understand further women's business participation, their motivations, and their perceived deviation from the norm, Still and Guerin (1991) proposed a classification system that took into account both business objectives and business size. They differentiate between a 'small business owner' who is working to further personal goals, and an 'entrepreneur' pursuing profit and growth.

Various other paradigms of women in business have also emerged which acknowledge women's desires and motivations. An interesting one developed to help trainers stop thinking of women as an homogenous group was developed by the Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry (1996). This model presents an argument for starting to think about 'different client groups being made up of individuals with different needs' (Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry 1996, p.14). The authors set out this schema for considering the types of businesses operated by women:

- self-sustaining—satisfies the personal needs of the operator but may not make a profit, although it is expected to be self-funding

- family income—needed to contribute financially to the household expenses
- self-fulfillment—contributes to self-fulfillment in addition to the domestic caring roles and responsibilities
- traditional—full-time, making profit and may employ others

Small businesses can also be characterised by their operating structure. Field (1997, p.5) suggests a list of structural or organisational characteristics of small business:

- independently owned and operated
- closely controlled by owners/managers who also contribute most, if not all, of the operating capital
- the principal decision-making functions rest with the owners/managers

Women's participation in small business

Surveys conducted over the past ten years give a variety of information about women in small business. While there is some consistency in the figures, there are also indicators of rapid and widespread change. Wolcott (1996) notes that surveys indicate women are establishing small businesses at three to four times the rate that men are, especially in the areas of self-employment and home employment. The ABS estimates indicate that between 33 per cent and 34 per cent of all small business operators are women (ABS 1995c, 1997b).

Roffey et al. (1996) point out that 'between 1989–90 and 1993–94, all of the increase in females working in their own business has been in those businesses without any employees' (p.8). During this period the number of women working in their own businesses increased by 39 per cent compared with an increase of 30 per cent for males. The report also notes a slight decline over the same time period in the number of female-operated businesses which employed other people.

Another area in which women are displaying an increase in self-employment is in home-based work. *Australian social trends* (ABS 1995a) notes that in 1992 the same proportion of men and women home-based workers (26%) said they began working at home in order to open or operate their own or a family business (p.97). The second reason given by women for choosing home-based work was that children were too young or they preferred to look after their children (23%), while for men the main reason was wanting an office at home (27%). Only around six per cent of home-based workers indicated they chose this form of work because no other work was available. No gender breakdown is given for this category.

Contrary to popular misconception, most women business operators continue to be based away from home. However, the steady rate of growth in this area, which has already been noted (Gittens 1998, p.4), means that home-based work must be factored in to both VET policy and provision.

Small businesses run by women

The 1997 ABS *Year book* Australia (ABS 1997b) examines the overall structure of the small business sector, focussing in particular on the role women play in small business, and on some of the characteristics of female business operators and the

businesses they operate. It reveals the following about small businesses operated by women in 1994–95:

- only one third had any employees
- of the 310 000 women working in their own business (p.328):
  - 28 per cent were in retail trades
  - 14 per cent in property and business services
  - 11 per cent in personal and other services
  - 9 per cent in construction
  - 8 per cent in manufacturing
  - 8 per cent in health and community services
- 32.7 per cent of all small businesses were operated by women—they were over represented in the following:
  - education (61%)
  - health and community services (55%)
  - personal and other services (52%)
  - accommodation, cáfes and restaurants (48%)
  - cultural and recreational services (43%)
  - retail trade (40.2%)

These findings correlate with the so-called 'feminised' industries in which women's employment is concentrated. They also correlate with perceived growth areas for employment. In February 1997, over half of all employed women were concentrated in the four areas of retail trade, health and community services, property and business services and education (ABS 1997a).

Other surveys of small business in Australia have revealed the following information about the small businesses that women operate:

- a higher proportion of predominantly female-owned businesses have static income and static employment levels than either male-owned or businesses where neither male nor female owners predominated (ABS 1996, pp.10–18)
- over half of women small business operators work less than 35 hours per week (part-time) compared with one sixth of men
- a higher proportion of these women who work part-time are Australian-born
- women born outside Australia are more likely to be operating their business on a full-time basis than their Australian-born counterparts. They are also more likely to be employers (ABS 1995b)
- women operators working part-time have higher education levels than full-timers (27% hold either a degree or diploma compared with 19.6% of full-timers)
- the main industries in which women run part-time businesses are:
  - property and business services (20.3%) (full-time 13.8%)
  - construction (19.8%) (full-time 5%)
  - retail trade (18.6%) (full-time 31.3%)

The 1995–96 business growth and performance survey (ABS 1996) showed 60 per cent of all small firms with employees had a major decision-maker and ten per cent of these were women. The ABS February 1995 survey *Characteristics of small business in Australia* (ABS 1995b), showed that in nearly 30 per cent of all non-employing small businesses with a single decision-maker, that decision-maker was a woman.

In combination, the latter two surveys provide an estimate of a little over 80 000 Australian businesses which have a woman major decision-maker. This represents about ten per cent of all small businesses in Australia (the estimate excludes any non-employing firms with more than one operator—hence it may well be an underestimate). Education level does not appear to be a factor contributing to whether a woman becomes a major decision-maker in a business.

Support from family members

There is a discrepancy in the research about the amount of assistance provided to small business operators by family members. *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996) reports that women were more likely to have family members involved in their business than men (79% cf 70%). This result differs from other surveys which often describe women going it alone. Meredith and Barrett (1994) (quoted in Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry 1996) reported women claim non-participation and sometimes opposition from spouses is a problem issue for their business operations. Similarly, Roffey et al. (1996, p.44) quote a small sample study by McInnes (1990) which corroborates overseas findings that 'in no case, regardless of family structure, were women able to gain access to consistent unpaid labour and domestic support in the ways which are typical of male engagement in small business'. Another finding by Carr (1993) (also quoted in Roffey et al. 1996, p.45) is that small farm businesses managed and controlled by women from non-English-speaking backgrounds 'are typically based purely on women's labour, or with limited support from the husband'.

Characteristics of women small business operators

Many studies have attempted to construct a profile of women small business operators. Some of these are given below. The danger in constructing such profiles is that they become the basis on which further work is developed (even though it is clear that the profile describes the subjects of that particular study only). This can lead to the phenomenon of 'group think' which has already been identified as affecting how questions are developed in both research and policy analysis and development in relation to women in small business.

Several profiles of women business operators derived from four research studies are set out in table 1 (see page 19). These profiles illustrate the difficulty involved in getting a definitive picture of women in business. First there is the way characteristics are described. Although there is some overlap in the types of characteristics reported, this is limited to broad descriptors. All that can be said with certainty about women small business operators is that they tend to be more highly educated than the population in general, aged over 40, operating their business away from home with few if any employees. In addition, they are likely to be Australian-born (although this could be the result of sampling bias), and have at least one dependent child.

Researchers have been struck by characteristics that seem to be particular to women small business operators as a group. Observations include the fact that women often work less hours per week in their business, they tend not to 'grow' their businesses, they are less likely to take risks, they start businesses for different reasons, to name a few.

Explanations for these observed differences centre on women's desires to balance seemingly contradictory forces:

- family life versus dedication to business and the time commitment required

- alienation from the dominant masculine culture of work, industry and organisations
- lack of confidence preventing entrepreneurial drive and ambition
- a mismatch between workforce experience and the skills and experience required for managing a business 'successfully' (i.e. men are more likely to get some management experience in employment) (Barrett 1997; Gibb 1997; Roffey et al. 1996)

Non-Anglo–Australian women

There is a paucity of reliable data regarding women business operators from other than Anglo–Australian backgrounds. Generally samples are too small to have picked up a representative subset of women from these other groups. A 1992 Bureau of Immigration Research statistical report (quoted in Employment and Skills Formation Council 1994, p.6) states that women who have migrated from non-English-speaking countries are more likely than other women to be employers or run their own businesses. Eight per cent of these women who are in the labour force are self-employed, compared with 7.4 per cent of Australian-born women and 2.9 per cent of women born in other main English-speaking countries.

Data relating to small business and women from other equity-related categories (Aboriginal and indigenous peoples, those with a disability, rural or remote women) is either non-existent or exceedingly difficult to identify and locate. This paucity of data illustrates both a significant research gap, as well as the tendency of policy-makers to employ category politics (Bacchi 1996) and treat all women as the same.

Why women enter small business

Much is made of the tendency of women business operators to keep their enterprises small. This is of interest because it is assumed there is an unrealised potential for economic growth and employment which could be generated if those businesses were encouraged to expand. Barrett (1997) suggests a link between family responsibilities and women's apparent preference for small scale operations. She also identifies other possible factors, including a desire to give priority to the location and ambience of the working environment and to keep control over how time is organised. Other explanations centre on the areas in which women work. The notion of 'push' and 'pull' factors as being the motivating factors in decisions to go into business, is raised frequently in the research documents (Barrett 1997; Saxon & Allan-Kamil 1996 quoted by the TAFE Queensland Social Justice Unit in Billett 1997). Barrett (1997) uses the notion to indicate the degree to which business entry has been planned and correlates 'push' factors to unplanned or non-strategic entry into business. In her sample, she found that 'push' factors predominate, leading to the conclusion that women's entry into business is often less strategic than men's.

Women are considered to be non-strategic in business because they appear not to grow their businesses to the same extent men do. This is also linked with their failure to exhibit entrepreneurial drive and risk-taking behaviours. On the one hand, it is generally accepted that women's businesses are less likely than men's to fail (attributed to better preparation at start-up, keeping debt and overheads low and pursuing other deliberate strategies to remain small (Employment and Skills Formation Council 1994). On the other, there is a belief that women need to be encouraged to behave in business more like men.

Participants in Barrett's (1997) surveys spoke of a hobby growing into a viable business, needing to accommodate family responsibilities, and a desire to work on a variety of projects, as reasons for setting up a business. Whether these indicate unplanned or non-strategic decision-making is highly debatable. Certainly in the sense of business being about growth, profit maximisation and market share they may appear so, but another perspective might suggest very strategic decision-making in terms of having a reasonable income which allows room for other aspects of life, and enables an individual to exercise a large degree of control on her working life.

Barrera and Robertson's (1996) focus group participants gave the following reasons for their preference to stay small and avoid being employers:

- lack of knowledge about issues relating to employment
- wanting to maintain a feeling of self-sufficiency and control
- not wanting increased responsibilities
- not feeling a need to expand (happy to remain small)

Still and Geurin (1991) found that the major reason women gave for starting up their own business was that they wanted 'greater autonomy, independence and flexibility'. Similarly, ABS surveys of home-based business operators found that the deciding factors for both men and women were related to a positive desire to run a business and/or be based at home (ABS 1997b).

The TAFE Queensland Social Justice Unit study (in Billett 1997) states that only 15 per cent of their survey participants were 'pushed' into establishing a business. This research identifies a range of push and pull factors as set out in table 1.

Table 1: Push and pull factors in business establishment

Push factors	Pull factors
Economic necessity	Confidence in own abilities
Threat of unemployment	Better accessibility to better education
Frustration or dissatisfaction with work	The wish to be economically independent
Limited opportunities for advancement in current job	Identifying a gap or market niche to pursue
Gender-related career blocks	

Findings from the above studies are aggregated in table 2 (see p.20) to provide a more comprehensive account of the characteristics of women's participation in small business.

Recent work by Still and Timms (1998a) has extended Still and Guerin's (1991) classification system for women in business (see section on how businesses are categorised, p.14) into a typology which includes three categories of characteristics. These relate to:

- the operator's reasons for entry into the business
- characteristics of the business
- the stage of lifecycle (of either the operator or the business, or both)

Still and Timms' (1998a) complete classification system is set out in table 3 (see p.21).

Stills and Timms' model provides a useful mechanism for dealing with the shortcomings of the 'push-pull' model of business entry. It allows for a combination of factors contributing to decision-making and thus produces a much more accurate picture of the process than the oversimplified and dualistic 'push-pull' model.

Table 2: Characteristics of women and small business

Characteristic	Still and Guerin (1991)	QLD TAFE (in Billett 1997)	Barrera and Robertson (1996)	SA Women's Advisory Council (1996)
Sample	357 self-employed women	50 business women	113 business women	163 responses re 259 business owners
Location	NSW	QLD	WA and SA	Rural/regional SA
Age	Between 30 and 45		Average 43 years	Majority over 40
Education	Degree or professional training		46% grad or postgrad 25% certificate or diploma	Lower than metropolitan but higher than local area
Ethnicity	Australian parents		89% English as first language	Less than 10% overseas born
Dependent children			< 1	Over 50% with dependants
Business structure	Sole owner	66% sole proprietor	46% sole owners 37% in partnership	Most in partnership with marital/de facto partner
Industry	Services	84% traditional women's areas	34% services 25% wholesale and retail trades	Most in services
Age of business	More than 1 year	60% more than 5 years	Average 3.7 years	60% < 5 years (primary producers 5 times more likely than services to have > 20 years)
Employees	Less than 4		Average 1.3	64% 1–5, 29% none
Set-up	Started the business themselves	68% started business themselves		
Premises	Rented premises		53% rented 33% home-based	66% away from home
Reason for starting	Greater autonomy, independence and flexibility	15% 'pushed' through economic necessity		
Growth plans			Over 77% were considering expansion in next 12 months	40% want to expand, 40% remain the same, 20% had a declining business or trying to sell

Findings about women's motivations in relation to small business parallel other research into what motivates women into particular occupations and career paths. Lyall and Hawkins (1993) found that women want career paths, financial independence, and people-oriented work that involves both teamwork and initiative. They assert that women choose occupations based on their attraction to the specific tasks involved and demonstrate their commitment to career development through engaging in training over and above what is formally required.

Table 3: Cellular model of women in small business (from Still & Timms 1998b)

Typology of women	Typology of businesses	Life/business cycle
	Informal sector	Necessity
NEIS participants	*Marginal home-based worker*	
Buying a job	Home-based trades	
	Women in family businesses	
Requiring flexibility	Home-based professionals and para professionals	
	Women in family businesses	
Escaping from corporate and public sector	Non-employing proprietors	
Professional women		Interest
Utilising a skill or having a creative drive	Home-based cottage business	Organic growth
	Multi-founder business	
Multi-business founders	Micro-business	
Gazelles	Small enterprise	Fire in the belly
		Rapid growth

The notion of women's strategic approach to building serious careers is also taken up in Kempnich et al. (1993). An exploration of women's employment patterns revealed an ongoing pattern of serious workforce participation punctuated by short breaks. This research suggests that women's commitment to paid work and 'real' jobs has been underestimated because of their tendency not to stay with the same employer. Thus their activity has not mirrored the traditional male career path of 'working one's way to the top' within an organisation. One explanation for this difference is that women's progress within organisations has not been facilitated in the same way as men's.

A survey of community attitudes to small business reported by Coopers & Lybrand (1995), found overwhelmingly negative opinions as to what it would be like to be in small business. Women were found to be more negative both in terms of their own small business involvement and in encouraging their children to go into small business. When probed further about why they would not encourage their children to set up a small business, their responses reflected strong concerns about the impact of being a small business operator on family life (Coopers & Lybrand 1995, p.266). When asked to identify the positive aspects of operating a small business, the most common responses were 'being your own boss' and 'control your own time'.

Thus a contradiction is revealed. Women are starting up new businesses in unprecedented numbers. Researchers are attributing those increasing numbers to a desire to accommodate work and family responsibilities and yet women generally are quite negative about the impacts of small business on family life. This contradiction requires further scrutiny.

In contrast to those community perceptions of what running a small business would be like, the *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996) publication, *Small business index: A special report on women in business,* found that 84 per cent of women already in business would recommend running a small business to other women. Interestingly, the main reasons they gave made no mention of family life. Their responses in order of importance were:

- job satisfaction (30%)
- females should have the choice (27%)
- independence (27%)

- anyone is capable (9%)
- flexible hours (9%)
- women are talented (8%)
- achievement (8%)

Impacts of the changing nature and organisation of work on small business

Some of the recent growth in businesses operated by women has to be considered in the light of the changing nature and organisation of work, which has been brought about through the broader agenda of economic development. The *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996) report (cited p.21) found that prior to working in their current business, women tended to have been working in government or small business. In contrast, men were more likely to have been working in a large company. Women were also more likely to have been unemployed prior to their business start-up than men (6% compared with 1%). These differences in area of previous employment may indicate where the effects of industry restructuring are having the greatest impact on women's and men's employment.

Some traditional areas of women's employment have been eliminated because they have been seen to be not directly involved in production or the core business of the organisation. Women in these sorts of jobs have found it very difficult to quantify their service-oriented contributions to efficiency and productivity, given the focus on material rather than human outputs. Many such women are also now part of the new self-employed, often based at home and isolated from training opportunities.

ABS statistics reflect this shift in employment share from large enterprises to small business. The fact that almost all of the net growth in small business has been in sole operators with no employees, has been noted earlier in this report. Indeed, a recent article in the Adelaide newspaper, *The Advertiser*, reported that while the number of small businesses in South Australia is increasing, the number of staff they employ is actually falling. (*The Advertiser*, 23 February 1998, p.22). The article claims that the number of small businesses grew by 5.6 per cent between February 1996 and February 1997, but the number of people employed by small businesses fell by 3.4 per cent. These figures indicate the pace of change in the sector and suggest that it should be watched closely.

Murphy (1993, p.39) investigated women working outside the industrial award system in South Australia. This study noted a large group of women in the community services sector who, as a result of government policies of de-institutionalisation and reducing the size of the public sector, were being defined as self-employed and yet showed none of the normal characteristics of that status (e.g. control over their working life, ability to set rates). These women were working through agencies which were being contracted by government to provide respite care services.

Murphy's observations were reinforced two years later by the ABS (1995c) report *Small business in Australia.* It notes that between 1983–84 and 1994–95 the most significant small business growth occurred in the health and community services industry with an average annual rate of 7.7 per cent per annum (compared with 3.3% overall) (ABS 1995c, p.16). Further, it reveals that between 1991–92 and 1994–95 the greatest increase in the number of small businesses occurred in the health and community services sector (32.8%). Other significant change occurred in property and business services (19.7%), and education (13.9%).

The changes in this industry are clearly connected with declines in public service employment and activity. Of the 9100 new own account workers in health and community services during the period 1983–84 to 1994–95 (an overall increase of 11%), 87 per cent were women. This compares with an average increase for all other industries of three per cent, one-third of whom are women.

Another ABS study just released (reported in *The Advertiser*, 21 February 1998, p.25) shows that between 1993 and 1997, the proportion of Australian employees working Monday to Friday fell from 64 per cent to 60 per cent, and the proportion of workers with flexible start and finish times rose from 34 per cent to 37 per cent. Perhaps surprisingly, but perhaps not, male employees are more likely to have so-called flexible hours than female employees in both full-time and part-time work. This raises questions about what is actually meant by the term 'flexibility' (i.e. flexibility for whom) and whether it in fact means the ability to make more demands on workers. It also suggests the assumption that equity will follow when flexibility is achieved is ill founded.

Training and learning in small business

Not surprisingly, most of the focus in the Australian VET system, and also research about training, focusses on training potential or existing employees. Training is, after all, about maximising human capital and since the industrial revolution the overwhelming majority of that human capital has had the status of 'employee'. However, the emphasis on employees masks the training needs of managers and/or employers. Two assumptions are inherent in this approach. The first is that education is for professionals, including managers; training is for workers/employees. Following this is a belief that managers do not require training—a belief both recognised and soundly rebutted in the Karpin Report (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills 1995a, 1995b).

This section discusses research into small business operators and training, focussing as much as possible on women. However, the conflation between employer/employee in the training rhetoric relating to small business should be noted, as should the contradictions inherent in this.

'Training' in and for small business

Because of the exploratory and descriptive nature of much research, the term 'training' is often not clearly defined. This makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions from such research findings. This lack of clarity can be linked to a range of factors, including a mindset which correlates 'training' with apprenticeships and technical and further education (TAFE) trades courses, and the increasing complexity of the VET system associated with the pace and extent of recent and ongoing changes.

A further example of the lack of clarity around the term 'training' is illustrated by Barrett (1997). She acknowledges a general vagueness among her focus group participants about VET and what it means. Barrett notes her inability in some cases to identify when participants are talking about their original VET training (if they had any) and when they are talking about other types of education and/or training.

Clarification is required as to what is meant by 'training' for small business, who the 'users' of such training are, and how small business is positioned as a stakeholder within and for VET.

Learning and training in small business

Research into the nature of learning and training in small business does not provide a coherent, well theorised map of activities in this diverse sector. Field (1997) discusses research which outlines small business preferences with regard to training. He quotes the Coopers & Lybrand (1995) assertion that no matter what the VET sector does, one third of small business say they will remain unlikely to use external training. Field also explores research findings on why the uptake of training in small business is so low and claims that existing literature gives a fairly comprehensive indication of the scope of learning which occurs in small enterprises. More contentiously, Baker and Wooden (1995) contend that small business employment is largely in unskilled work and this is a major factor contributing to low levels of training. The following review and analysis identifies significant issues relating to the nature of learning and training in small business, which remain only poorly understood.

A general criticism apparent in the literature relating to small business management courses, is that such courses tend to use examples from big business and that these often have no direct relevance to participants. Another common assertion is that much more business management skill development comes from 'street knowledge' than from formal training. One of the most valuable aspects of formal training is considered to be the opportunities for networking, which were part of the process—particularly for women. The main benefits of this networking are sharing skills and relieving isolation.

Field (1997) reviews knowledge of learning and training in small business and points the way for research which can assist small business in Australia realise its economic potential. He draws attention to the fact that different businesses have different emphases on learning. Some of the reasons for this are found in:

- basis for competition
- reliance on knowledge
- whether staff are permanent or casual
- who has the knowledge which contributes to business success

American studies of small to medium sized enterprises which have stood the test of time have shown that they have achieved this sustainability because they recognise the value of the contributions that skilled workers make in a competitive market (Rowden 1995, 1997). What sets these enterprises apart is that they utilise aspects of individual's knowledge to secure workplace goals. This includes the organisation and administration of the enterprise as well as 'technical' functions.

The recent Australian experience has been that marginalised workforce participants who are temporary and/or part-time are not being provided with training. Other studies have indicated that small businesses use the labour market, rather than training, to resolve skill shortages. (Billett et al. 1997; Robinson 1997)

Current skill levels of small business operators

Both female and male respondents in a *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996) survey on women in business were asked to assess their skills in relation to several factors. Overall, similar patterns emerged for both women and men. The major differences were that women were slightly more confident than men about their dispute-handling abilities, while men expressed more confidence in their finance and marketing skills. Women attributed their success to good customer service

(34%) and willingness to work hard (23%), while men identified experience/ business sense (25%) and product knowledge (23%) as being the main factors contributing to their success.

Respondents were also asked to identify which gender was better at certain aspects of running a business. Their responses are set out in table 4.

Table 4: Gender factors in business operation

In operating a business, which sex is:	All respondents (%)			Male respondents (%)			Female respondents (%)		
	men	no difference	women	men	no difference	women	men	no difference	women
More pleasant to deal with	8	75	13	8	78	13	8	79	12
More aggressive	25	46	28	25	47	27	25	43	31
More hardworking	8	69	21	8	71	19	7	64	28
More persuasive	9	46	43	6	46	46	18	46	35
Better at handling staff	21	50	26	23	50	24	17	49	33
Better at handling clients	11	60	27	14	58	26	4	65	30
More able to take tough decisions	35	53	11	35	54	8	33	47	19
Quicker to learn	6	63	28	7	65	25	4	57	38
More ready to ask for advice	7	38	54	8	41	50	4	29	67

Source: *Yellow Pages* Australia, 1996, p.19

The *Yellow Pages* Australia (1996) study concludes that while the overall patterns of response are similar across the three groupings, there are some interesting deviations in women's responses compared with men's and those of the group as a whole. Women have a much higher perception of themselves as being ready to ask for advice, learning quickly, being better at handling clients and staff, and working hard. They are more likely to see themselves as aggressive and able to take tough decisions and less likely to consider themselves more persuasive than men.

Barrera and Robertson (1996) found that existing small business management training is comprehensive and available in a variety of flexible delivery modes both for metropolitan and country students. However, they considered that these do not always meet certain requirements and that 'the training which is available is more suitable for small business people who have, through various means, developed some preliminary skills and knowledge in the subject or who at least are confident of their ability to learn in a reasonable formal setting' (Barrera & Robertson 1996, p.12). They identified 'a significant group of small business women who require development in a variety of skills and knowledge related to running a small business, particularly those skills related to employing staff' (Barrera & Robertson 1996, p.12). Additionally, most participants in the training course pilot run as part of the above project said they were more likely to do more training because they had done this course.

Roffey et al. (1996) report that owner/managers consider they need skills in at least five areas:

- ability to turn one's hand to anything
- financial skills
- people management
- interpersonal/communication skills
- business planning

Technical/industry-related skills were considered to be of moderate importance, as were marketing and customer service. Gibb (1997) suggests factors preventing small business women from doing training are that the majority of the sector is self-employed, isolated, works long hours and cannot afford time away from the business.

Informal training and learning

Another aspect of the general lack of clarity about what VET actually is, is a tendency not to differentiate between formal (accredited) and informal training in the VET/small business literature. Field (1997) believes that there is under-recognition of the amount of learning that occurs in small business. He observes that the word 'delivery' is interpreted very narrowly and that individuals actually learn through a range of activities, including discussion with product representatives, asking questions, experimenting, watching someone more experienced and so on. Such an approach concurs with much research relating to workplace learning. The literature concerning workplace learning and VET well illustrates the blurring of boundaries around learning for work, VET, and informal learning at work. These differences are not easily accommodated by the popular descriptors of 'on'- or 'off'-the-job learning or training.

Billett (1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994b, 1997), in a series of studies of learning in the workplace, similarly concludes that learning is part of everyday thinking and acting in the work environment. Moreover, the direct guidance of others and indirect guidance available through observing and listening, provides a basis for guiding goal-directed activity which not only secures workplace tasks, but generates and reinforces the individual's knowledge. Rather than learning having to be planned and formally delivered in competency-based slices, it is something that occurs all the time. However, to improve its potency, structured experiences and guidance can be enhanced.

Barrett (1997) identifies two broad categories of informal learning engaged in by participants in her study of mainly small business operators:

- personal activities
- observing
- reading
- developing organisational skills
- empathy and caring
- asking questions
- outreach activities
- talking to employees, suppliers, competitors
- attending conferences, information nights, trade exhibitions etc., and involvement in community and sporting groups

This poses particular problems for researchers investigating women's experiences of training in or for work. For instance, ABS surveys on work-related training define training very broadly to include anything from a formal course to a worker asking a co-worker how to do something. Failing to differentiate can lead to conclusions, such as those drawn by Wooden and VandenHeuval (1997). They contend that women are advantaged in relation to men when it comes to workplace training. They base their findings on an analysis of ABS figures. However, they fail to make specific the fact that the data

only relate to full-time workers in their main job and include the whole spectrum of what ABS defines as training.

Small business attitudes to training

Small business especially is seen to have a particular set of attitudes to knowledge and learning. The Australian National Training Authority (1996, p.20) cites an employer satisfaction survey conducted by AGB McNair which found variations in responses by size of establishment, industry and across States/Territories. Specifically, these variations centred on:

- smaller enterprises being less satisfied with VET than larger ones
- employers wanting more practical experience, more job readiness and greater flexibility in course content
- generally poor knowledge about the VET system

Small business operators are considered to have somewhat negative attitudes to training and its relevance to their activities. Coopers & Lybrand (1994) report that only six per cent of small businesses identified training (employer or employee) as a way to address problems or issues limiting growth (p.20). Rather, small business operators consider 'learning as you go' to be the best way of gaining skills as a small business owner/manager (p.24). The reasons for this belief are (in order of frequency of response) that this method is:

- practical, hands-on
- easiest way
- quickest way
- can be done as part of the job

Learning by discussion with peers or other business owners is regarded as another way of gaining skills, mainly because this provides a benefit to the business and is industry-specific.

From case studies conducted as part of his research Field (1997) found that:

- employees' attitudes and control of cash flow are commonly viewed as more significant than skills
- small businesses assume that government schemes are an imposition and this may colour their attitude to VET programs
- a small business may offer no promotion opportunities, so there is little incentive to undertake formal training
- a significant proportion of small business employees fall into one or more of the following categories—female, part-time, over 30

Coopers & Lybrand (1994) identify variables which impact small business training expenditure:

- perceived value of training
- attitude to growth
- number of employees
- annual turnover
- level of dependence on 'trainable skills'
- industry-specific course needs

The major variables are considered to be the first two.

Roffey et al. (1996) describe research investigating where small business operators go for assistance. A number of studies have found a high usage and high satisfaction with family and friends as sources of business advice (pp.103–109). Further, there is a strong perception that externally-provided training courses are not relevant, regardless of who runs them. The main reasons given for this view by Roffey et al. (1996) were that such courses are:

- not relevant
- theory rather than practical
- no immediate benefits to business
- not the kind of thing you can teach
- not necessary
- not designed for small business

Barrett (1997) found similar attitudes to training among small business proprietors as other studies. Namely:

- content is sometimes out of date or based on big business examples
- a preference for training which addressed specific issues
- high valuing of the 'hands-on' aspects of training
- a preference for business people rather than academics to run courses

In addition, people without trade qualifications in Barrett's (1997) focus groups identified small business training courses as very important resources (particularly with respect to having the self-confidence to embark on an enterprise). Most of those who had a trades qualification considered that their trade course had not addressed either general or specific business skills sufficiently to help them set up and run an enterprise.

Field (1997) considers the VET sector has a view that changing the approach to delivery is the way to make training more attractive to small business and that this view should be challenged through future research. Childs (1997, p.27) expresses a similar view, claiming,

> *What constitutes 'success' in terms of VET (credentials either formally or informally attained, national standards, assessable learning outcomes and industry development) does not constitute 'success' for small business (wanting to work on immediate issues and enterprise development, to deal with issues of survival and in improving marginal profits and in enterprise development)... It is not sufficient to investigate ways of encouraging small business to pay for existing VET services—VET services themselves need to be radically rethought.*

Curriculum and delivery—consumer views

A variety of logistical issues in respect of training delivery were raised by Barrett's (1997) focus group participants:

- session times
- total time required
- distance
- self-concept (i.e. not really running a business)
- fragmentation of courses—lack of coherent vision of outcomes

These echo the sentiments expressed in other studies.

Barrett (1997) points out that people's comments about what was lacking in training coincides with their personal views about their own weak areas. However, there is agreement with other studies as to what sorts of areas business managers feel were not adequately dealt with in early training. These include:

- 'people side' of business
- time management
- attention to waste
- accounting
- marketing
- superannuation
- legalities of hiring
- general area of obligations to the public and to government (tax, occupational health and safety etc.)

Barrera and Robertson (1996) set out to identify gaps in the skills and knowledge of small business women which may influence their decision to take on employees, and to design and pilot a training course to address these. Through a series of surveys and focus groups, they identified the particular training needs for women running small- to medium-sized businesses (as opposed to micro businesses). These were:

- industrial relations for small business
- managing employees, including advanced human resource management
- leadership and management of teams
- planning for growth—beyond the first stage

Participants in the Barrera and Robertson (1996) study reported a preference for the following learning formats:

- workshops (44%)
- tutor (26%)
- classes (17%)
- self-paced (13%).

Their venue preferences were:

- community centre (42%)
- TAFE (31%)
- on site (25%)
- remote (1%)
- other (1%)

In addition, 46 per cent of participants indicated a preference for all or some of the training to be women only.

Findings of the SA WAC (1996) survey include:

- a strong preference for self-paced home learning (44%)
- preferred duration is a one-off (41%) followed by unlimited self-paced (37%), and weekly sessions (32%), with both men and women showing similar preferences
- a preference for delivery at their own discretion, followed by evening

Specific areas for their own management training identified by the participating rural South Australian small business operators were:

- organisation and planning (87%)
- marketing and sales (87%)
- idea generation (85%)
- finance (81%)
- dealing with people (76%)
- business operations (74%)

Ranking of importance by both men and women in the above study was similar, although men indicated a greater need for training in five out of the seven areas (SA WAC 1996, p.52). Males' need for training (self-reported) ranged from 63 per cent to 97 per cent across the areas with 79.7 per cent being the average. Females ranged from 53 per cent to 88 per cent with an average across all areas of 77.3 per cent. So, although females indicated a greater overall need for training than males, they perceive they require this training over fewer management skill areas than males. This finding contrasts with Meredith and Barrett (1994) (quoted in Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry 1996) who found women self-employed entrepreneurs in Queensland nominating more training areas than men.

Costs relating to training for small business

Coopers & Lybrand (1994) identified a correlation between turnover and training expenditure (p.15). They also claim that employers who have undertaken post-secondary education have higher training expenditure, citing previous research by the Bureau of Industry Economics 1991 publication, *Small business review* 1990–91, which had similar findings.

Coopers & Lybrand (1994) also claim fees are not an issue for small business owners. However, training providers (Hooper 1998) claim that they are a critical issue for women. Women's Bureau (1993) notes the considerable difference between fees charged by private providers and those charged by TAFE. Given Hooper's (1998) advice, the fact that private providers are pitching courses to women is of concern. While this may be seen as private providers being more responsive to the needs of women small business owners, it could also be a case of opportunism due to public resources being unevenly distributed in favour of men via traditional courses at TAFE (ANTA 1997a, p.79).

Based on recent pilots of small business management training packages for women, Liz Hooper of the Small Business Training Centre at Adelaide Institute of TAFE reports that the cost of training is a real concern for women (see appendix 2). She asserts small business women are more likely to pay per module than for a full course and are more likely to commit to training that includes this flexibility. Moreover, this flexibility provides an opportunity to assess the relevance of the course and select areas of personal need without committing to a high up-front fee. Her experience was that women are more likely to seek the approval of a third party for large items of expenditure. Costly training could well be considered almost a self-indulgence.

'Best practice' in small business training

Coopers & Lybrand (1995) have undertaken a detailed review of the literature pertaining to small business training needs and the evaluation of small business sector programs. They point out a 'distinct lack of market segmentation and

analysis by training providers' (Coopers & Lybrand 1995, p.296) in spite of repeated assertions in the research literature that this is not just desirable, but essential. They also find significant correlation between the findings of Australian and international studies.

As far as evaluation of training programs is concerned, Coopers & Lybrand (1995) found that research is still concentrating on understanding training needs and preferred forms of training, and that evaluation research 'is generally ad hoc and reflects "one-off" reviews of methodologies'. In addition, they found limited empirical research on the most effective forms of instruction to owner/managers.

In contrast with the common finding that owner/managers prefer courses which deal with specific problems and subject matter, their own survey of training providers revealed that the majority of courses being offered are concerned with 'developing general management skills, providing conceptual knowledge on aspects of business and giving a broad view of small business operations' (Coopers & Lybrand 1995, p.314).

Following their assessment that the evaluation of management training courses generally leaves much to be desired, Coopers & Lybrand (1995) then evaluated three small business training programs themselves. The purpose of this was to assess the impact of those courses on the development of small business management skills among students. The three courses were then compared with normative models of best practice derived from the literature. As a result of this research, Coopers & Lybrand (1995) asserted the three main indicators of best practice are:

- market segmentation by differentiating both courses and participants along industry lines
- content which is 'short, sharp and specific', relates to specific problems and opportunities, and emphasises solutions and analysis of issues relating to actual experience
- courses with an optimum duration of ten hours

Previous research by Coopers & Lybrand (1994) had suggested the following profile of a 'good small business course':

- short, sharp, specific
- local venue, short duration (three hours) and sequence (four weeks)
- flexible timing
- interactive delivery, encouraging action and peer group learning
- related to specific problems and opportunities
- pitched at appropriate level
- linked to participants' environment
- presenters with empathy derived from first-hand experience

While this research provides a position as to what constitutes best practice for small business training, it should also be noted that the research is at best reading gender neutral, and more likely, gender blind. Therefore, it is appropriate to interrogate notions of best practice, where 'one size fits all', which again portrays a view of small business as an homogenous category.

An illustration of factors important for women small business operators is available from a pilot training project conducted in South Australia in 1997 (Hooper 1998). Critical to the success of the training provided was a

participative needs analysis conducted with women small business operators in their locality/immediate region. This consultation ensured relevant content and also attendance at training sessions of appropriate length and location, designed to accommodate the participants' busy schedules. Again, meeting other women business owners from the same geographic region, irrespective of the nature or industry of the businesses, was ranked as extremely significant.

Women and learning/training

The SA WAC (1996) study of women small business operators in rural South Australia aims to identify the extent of business-related training undertaken by owners, the areas of business management training needed and the preferred structure, duration and timing of such training. One hundred and sixty three valid survey responses were received from small businesses (with data on 259 business owners) from three non-metropolitan regions of South Australia. The sample included primary producers.

Key findings include:

- one quarter of respondents (27% women, 19% men) had received training in business management, commerce or marketing at the tertiary or TAFE level
- over 43 per cent (men 30%, women 50%) indicated a need for business management training
- the need for management training is greater in businesses that have been established or purchased (49% and 42%) compared with those inherited (18%). The need for training generally decreases with the length of time in business

The last point contradicts Barrett's (1997) findings linking training needs to the life cycle of the business. She found that it was not until the business started to mature that management skills were considered important. In the initial phase, it was training in the 'technical' skills involved in delivering the product or service that Barrett's participants considered more important. This anomaly may be due to Barrett's (1997) emphasis on trades-based businesses. The SA WAC (1996) study found more rural South Australian women than men had received TAFE level or higher training (27% versus 19.2%). This differs from other studies which have found the opposite. Nevertheless, the South Australian study also found that more women than men said they wanted more training (50% versus 29.5%). Possible explanations for this difference include:

- inappropriateness of business training received by women relative to the circumstances of the current business (male education and workforce experience is found to be more directly related to their business activities, with males having more access to managerial experience than women)
- males feel they can manage with the training and experience they currently possess (i.e. males may be more optimistic about their competencies)
- females may be more conservative in the estimation of their business management competency

This report (SA WAC 1996) also verifies Coopers & Lybrand's (1994) finding that a person's stated need for training declines with the length of time in the business. However, as noted earlier, no gender analysis was undertaken in the Coopers & Lybrand study.

Women business owner participants involved in a training pilot project run in South Australia (Hooper 1998) were specific about their expectations of training courses:

- accreditation is not important initially but once women have some accredited modules under their belt they become more interested in adding to these to gain a certificate
- networking is a more valued outcome than getting information
- programs are best run by business women or those with a really good understanding of the practical pressures
- women prefer short sessions to longer ones covering more than one topic

3 The VET system, small business and women

Key issues

Since the establishment of a national VET system in the late 1980s, there has been continual criticism that policy has been developed on the run in general, and in a research vacuum specifically (e.g. Vickers 1995). Furthermore, the system has been framed on a training model best suited to large (and specifically metals) industry. This is a system that is market-driven; based on the premise of competition rather than co-operation and mutuality of strategic alliances; and focusses on responsiveness to clients (industry) rather than long-term goals (Billett et al. 1997, pp.1–2). It is a system in which training is delivered in packages of competency-based, industry-specific, tightly prescribed outcomes, with little or no attention paid to processes of learning.

That this system does fit some is acknowledged. This acknowledgment is tempered by the slow take-up of training by many employers, despite such training being designed as an increasingly deregulated system that is industry-driven and industry-led (Allen Consulting Group 1994; Butterworth 1995; Sweet 1995). Another paradox is that with the emphasis on major industry/big business and packaged training based on defined and therefore time locked skills, many of the 'users' (existing and potential) of the training products now available are required to somehow fit into a system of delivery described as 'flexible' and based on user choice. This challenge is of significance for small businesses in general, and women in particular. Both groups have been marginalised as key stakeholders; both are firmly centred in the locus of turbulent change occurring in and around how work is organised; and both offer new insights to a future in which the ability to respond rapidly and creatively to change will intensify.

Despite the establishment of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and a new national system for vocational education and training based firmly on two expressed aims—one being the skilling of an internationally competitive workforce and the other the achievement of equity (ANTA 1994)—policy development, systems design and implementation, and so subsequently all processes and practices relating to VET, have been based on a distributive 'target group' approach to equity. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, equity has, from this time, been treated as an add-on, rather than a central organising feature (Butler 1997a). Hence, the training system that has evolved continues to perpetuate the histories and current needs of industry, and especially 'big' industry/business. These histories have in the main excluded or marginalised women. As a result the VET system fails to satisfactorily address the equity needs of both the present and emergent labour forces, continually described as one of the most gender segmented labour forces of all OECD countries.

The development of VET policy indicates that for the next five years VET provision will operate within a competitive marketplace. However, there is no indication as to how equity will be achieved in this process. This is of concern given that the deregulated VET sector will continue to receive significant amounts of public funding.

As 'users' of VET, small business has been engaged with in a very limited way. More attention has been paid to how small business can be used to provide apprenticeships and traineeships than to the specific needs of their operations. Small business is known not to participate in VET to the same extent as large business. Given this, it is not surprising that there appears to be a lack of commitment to either a coherent small business strategy or a mechanism for ensuring high-level and formalised decision-making and advisory capacity for small business. This is particularly so now that the emphasis is on transferring responsibility for training from the State to employers.

There is strong and consistent evidence that enterprises around Australia (both small and large) are reducing their commitment to formal vocational education provisions. Moreover, current policy settings are unlikely to address this problem and may even exacerbate it further. Certainly, these policies seem to be particularly ill-focussed in their response to the needs of small business. The evidence of a reducing commitment to vocational education provisions comes in two forms: commitment to quantum, and quality.

Together, decline in these two areas of commitment above suggests that long-term goals of the reform of vocational education in this country have failed. Securing a greater investment from enterprises and achieving enhanced goals in terms of the quantum and quality of vocational education through granting a lead role to industry have clearly not been realised.

The new VET national strategy (ANTA 1998) focusses almost entirely on skills and training, with minimal mention of knowledge and even less of learning. These absences are noteworthy given the emphasis on learning in the literature relating to workplace learning, learning organisations, and organisational learning—the key 'outputs' of and contexts for VET.

Small businesses offer sites that are ideal for trialling and evaluating innovative approaches to work-related learning that result in high skill levels. While such approaches are rarely competency-based, they are flexible enough for training to include, for example, experimentation and learning around new information technologies and the knowledges and attitudes critical to operate in global/local contexts.

The difficulty is that taught courses and books are unlikely to be able to provide the guidance required for women (or men) small business operators to best learn the knowledge they require in a way that is effective for their business. In an attempt to offer an account of how learning as part of everyday activity in small businesses can be organised, a view is offered about learning, together with curriculum for learning small business knowledge, which is drawn from empirical work. This account suggests that there are both strengths and weaknesses to learning through everyday activity. A curriculum for workplace learning needs to draw on these strengths and inhibit the weaknesses (Billett 1996a). The two key elements of the approach to curriculum advanced here are activities and guidance.

With appropriate and largely unobtrusive structuring of workplace experiences and the provision of guidance, there seems to be no reason why small businesses cannot become useful settings for the development of the knowledge required for their own operations. Establishing these arrangements is a role that could be assisted by TAFE vocational institutions, not in the provision of content but by assisting with the structuring of activity-based learning curriculum and providing access to guidance, as well as managing the certification process as and where that is desired (see Billett 1996b).

Background

The Australian National Training Authority is presently conducting consultations around the *National strategy for vocation education and training 1998–2003* (ANTA 1998). In this latest document, the twin aims focussing on the production of an internationally competitive skilled workforce and on equity (ANTA 1994) have been reframed into one 'mission statement':

> *To ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals with opportunities to optimise their potential.*
>
> (ANTA 1998, preface)

This mission statement provides a powerful example of a discursive shift in intention. No mention is made of a nationally competitive (or sustainable) workforce—the focus is solely on international competitiveness, with 'commerce' being elevated to join the high status accorded to 'industry'—an active stakeholder in the development of the new strategy. No mention is made of equity; rather the focus is on 'individuals' having the ability to enter what are now most often contractual arrangements ('opportunities') to 'optimise their potential' (i.e. individuals must accept responsibility to add value to their own human capital).

Of special concern to this report is the relegating of equity from a central platform of the system originally envisaged, to the third of five 'system objectives', viz.

- *equipping Australians for the world of work*
- *enhancing mobility in the labour market*
- *achieving equitable outcomes in vocational education and training*
- *to increase investment in training by industry*
- *maximising the value of public vocational education and training expenditure*

(ANTA 1998, preface)

This is a 'competitive strategy' (ANTA 1998, p.6), based on the delivery of training 'products' (training packages) through a training marketplace, in which a central concept is that of 'user pays'. Equity was identified as one of a list of issues for consultation through the vehicle of the draft strategy. With the focus on 'equitable outcomes' rather than equity per se (or equity and access), the issue was framed as follows:

> *Considerable national effort and expenditure has been invested over the past ten to 15 years to increase the participation in VET of targeted population groups. In the emerging training market, where the purchaser buys outputs, a key question will be how to best purchase activity to produce equitable outcomes.*
>
> (ANTA 1997b, p.5)

How this plays out within the new framework is yet to be tested. However, as previously discussed, activities designed to achieve equity within marketplace contexts or orientations, unless regulated and subject to resource accountability mechanisms, have not demonstrated success to date (e.g. Barnett 1993, Barnett & Wilson 1995, Butler 1996, 1997a). Similarly uncertain is what the fate of small business will be, following implementation of the new strategy, where again, small business is designated within the category 'industry'.

User choice

It appears at the moment that government wants to retain the power to dictate what will be delivered as VET and how this will be done, but hand over the responsibility for that to industry. Devolution through user choice is seen as the means of injecting flexibility into the system. Discussion around the concept of user choice implies there will be no difficulty for business to access public funding for training. One must conclude that it is therefore again developed around the model of large workplaces/big business.

The user choice focus being promoted by ANTA raises all the potential conflicts set out by Stephen Billett and associates in their work for Victoria (Billett et al. 1997)—especially the fact that the burden of responsibility is being transferred back to enterprises at the time when the nature of employment removes commitment on the part of both employers and employees to maintain a long-term relationship (under these conditions what would motivate employers to train?). A logical consequence of this changing employer/employee relationship would be that employers will attempt to transfer this responsibility for training to individual employees. In this respect, small business is ahead of large enterprises. Even ANTA is ambiguous about who the users are in its user choice literature. One wonders if this is not a deliberate way of remaining relevant when the next wave of individualist dogma begins to emerge.

Taylor et al. (1997) point out in an evaluation of Australian vocational training system pilot projects that there was 'little evidence that traditional arrangements . . . were radically disturbed'. Ferrier (in Ferrier & Anderson 1998) suggests the same in relation to her evaluation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander user choice pilots conducted in 1997. Ferrier (1998) asks three questions: did students get something different? did they get something better? and what are the likely implications for equity if user choice is implemented more widely? Although she concludes that customisation occurred that led to training which was more appropriate, she concedes that this outcome could have occurred through other means. Further, she acknowledges that students felt a degree of empowerment through having the opportunity to articulate their needs. However, she is sceptical in her assessment of the ability of user choice to contribute to improved equity in VET.

Small business

As 'users' of VET, small business has been engaged with in a very limited way. The approach appears to have been more about finding ways in which small businesses can be harnessed to provide apprenticeships and traineeships (group training being a prime example), than attending directly to the specific needs of small businesses and their operators. As Field (1997) has rightly pointed out, the 'problem' of small business and training has been tackled from a delivery perspective. The type and content of training has been taken as a given and not challenged.

There are no national VET policies relating to small business. In spite of the rhetoric, national policy-making still emphasises the needs of industry and individual large employers. The Australian National Training Authority has not established a small business advisory group as a subsidiary of the ANTA Board. Rather, its approach has been to hold regular small business forums. Three such exercises have been undertaken since the first in November 1995. There is no formal implementation process for small business strategies although the States

have been encouraged to consider small business as important and to bear this in mind in the course of their other activities.

This lack of commitment to either a coherent small business strategy or a mechanism for ensuring a high level and formalised decision-making and advisory capacity for small business is not surprising given the emphasis on transferring responsibility for training from the State to employers. Small business is known not to participate in VET to the same extent as large business. Baker and Wooden (1995) suggest this is because a large amount of small business employment is in unskilled areas. Given the concentration of women in small business and the historical view of women's work as unskilled, one would have to question this explanation as likely to be at best simplistic, and at worst naive.

Field (1997) suggests that to date VET authorities have responded to studies which have found that small business largely does not use VET, by believing their challenge is to repackage programs and modify delivery arrangements in an effort to increase demand. He claims the shortcomings of this approach are that:

- it is based on a belief that concepts contained in small business courses (many of which are drawn from big business) would improve small business viability
- it fails to recognise the amount of learning that occurs in many small businesses
- it implies a direct link between business demise and managerial skill
- it fails to appreciate that in a small business where there is little change, competition is based on low costs, and there may be little scope to do things differently
- it assumes that if the delivery mode changed, demand for training by small business would increase significantly

Field's proposals for a new approach to learning in small businesses focus more on employees in small business than on operators and once again lack any gender analysis.

Lifelong learning and training

The new VET national strategy focusses almost entirely on skills and training, with minimal mention of knowledge and even less of learning. These gaps are noteworthy given the emphasis on learning contained in the literature relating to workplace learning, learning organisations, and organisational learning—the key 'outputs' and contexts for VET. The absence is also noticeable in two other regards—the key focus on knowledge and information in 'new' (globally competitive) workplaces, and the high level of attention paid to lifelong learning in most European countries (Butler 1998a).

Small businesses offer sites that are ideal for trialing and evaluating innovative approaches to work-related learning that result in high skill levels. While such approaches are rarely competency-based, they are flexible enough for 'training' to include, for example, experimentation and learning around new information technologies and the knowledges and attitudes critical to operate in global/ local contexts.

Small business and VET: Policy direction and excursions

There is strong and consistent evidence that enterprises around Australia (both small and large) are reducing their commitment to formal vocational education provisions. Moreover, current policy settings are unlikely to address this problem and may even exacerbate it further. Certainly, these policies seem to be particularly ill-focussed in their response to the needs of small business. The evidence of a reducing commitment to vocational education provisions comes in two forms: commitment to quantum, and quality. Throughout the country and across most major industry sectors there is currently a downturn in apprenticeship numbers. In some States this has become quite critical. For example, Victoria's apprenticeship numbers declined by 41 per cent between 1990 and 1994 (STB 1995) and have not recovered since then (STB 1997).

Moreover, the commitment to training, which was a part of the national industrial agreements of the late 1980s and early 1990s, has now all but dissipated. This is evident in the lack of reference to training provisions within enterprise-based industrial agreements (Callus 1994; Guthrie & Barnett 1996; Misko 1996; Smith 1995). Investigations of enterprise agreements clearly indicate that the numbers of these awards which have clauses associated with training have dramatically declined (Callus 1994) to now represent only about 30 per cent of awards that have been reviewed (Guthrie & Barnett 1996).

Also, agreements which stipulate particular arrangements have declined even further and they constitute about only 25 per cent of these awards (Guthrie & Barnett 1996). So the overall commitment to industrial agreements which have structured vocational education components has declined significantly. Hence, in a different way the overall quantum of participation in vocational education provisions is declining, as mandated commitment under the national award system is replaced by unfulfilled voluntarism under the enterprise agreement model. With the Federal Government's planned move to reduce and simplify further the minimum award conditions applicable to enterprises, it would seem that no respite is likely in this area.

In terms of the small business commitment to VET, there is a strong perception, gauged by a study of 800 New South Wales small businesses, that vocational education provisions were irrelevant to small business (Coopers & Lybrand 1994) with such small businesses unlikely to engage in externally organised VET programs. Overwhelmingly, small businesses do not participate in vocational education provisions. Burke (1995) notes that small businesses, on average, only expend 1.7 per cent of their payroll on training compared with the three per cent expended by medium to large enterprises. Using ABS data, Gibb (1997) reports that small business training expenditure is considerably lower than large businesses. Only 18 per cent of small business, compared to 79 per cent of businesses with between 20 and 99 employees, and 97 per cent of business with over 100 employees expend funds on training. She concludes that 82 per cent of small businesses, which comprises 50 per cent of the private sector workforce, do not spend money on training (Gibb 1997).

Given this low participation, the findings of the New South Wales study (Coopers & Lybrand 1994) should be taken with caution as these are likely to be the opinions of those who have not engaged with any VET provisions. Significantly, Robinson (1997) argues that quite different data emerge when those who are in fact participating in VET are surveyed. In his study, participants in VET programs reported a high level of satisfaction (75%). However, despite the

views of these individuals, the quantum of enterprise commitment to training has declined significantly in recent times.

In terms of the quality of VET, two factors are emerging: a commitment to a shorter period of delivery, and a more specific focus on VET. First, the data relating to Australian activity indicate that there has been some increase in the commitment by enterprises to short-term entry-level training provisions (Billett et al. 1997). However, these provisions are at the cost of the longer apprenticeship programs. It seems that enterprises are opting for shorter-term provisions, which often bring with them more attractive subsidies than those in apprenticeship programs (Billett et al. 1997).

In addition, as these programs are increasingly work-based, they avoid the need for the trainees to be away from the workplace. However, this increase in shorter-term entry-level training not only does not equate to what has been lost in apprenticeship programs (Billett et al. 1997), it offers the prospect of a lower overall level of preparation for the workforce. Hence, enterprises in years to come may find that even the labour market is unable to meet their quality and skill requirements to maintain and develop their business.

Second, VET is increasingly focussing on the premise that enterprises want training programs that are highly specific and related closely to the needs of the particular enterprise (Catts 1996; Smith 1997). Efforts by government to increase the quality of vocational education appear to have failed, resulting in inappropriate and ineffective training.

Together, decline in the two areas of commitment above suggests that the long-term goals of the reform of vocational education in this country have failed. Securing a greater investment from enterprises and achieving enhanced goals in terms of the quantum and quality of vocational education through granting a lead role to industry have clearly not been realised. However, there is little joy in the bankruptcy of these policies as there are significant consequences for the nation and individuals.

It would appear that an industry-based approach to vocational education will create a deficiency in skills for the labour market in coming years, much in the same way as has resulted from the highly deregulated approach in the United Kingdom. As well, Australians wishing to enter or re-enter the workforce, pursue a career path, or establish a small business, may find that opportunities to access structured, quality on- and off-the-job skill development are becoming more infrequent, particularly for anything above basic or entry-level. Hence, it is necessary to consider the appropriateness of such policy directions in order to focus upon how women can be successful in small business.

Fittedness of current policy

It seems that there is a mismatch between what government provides and the needs of both enterprises and the women who wish to access developmental programs. The reasons for why small businesses do not invest in training are associated with the pressures experienced by small business, such as keeping the business afloat, as well as lack of incentives for individuals (Wooden & Baker 1996) and concerns about compliance costs (Cabulu et al. 1996). Added to the compliance costs is the confusion that enterprises often report when dealing with training systems (Callus 1994; Schofield 1996). This confusion is associated with the language, the formalised structures and the need to engage in activity

that is not understood or explained adequately, e.g. developing a training plan. It would seem that frequently small enterprises have neither the inclination nor the ability to negotiate the requirements.

Moreover, enterprises are unique organisations with idiosyncratic needs and requirements. Schofield (1994) and Callus (1994) both question whether the model for organising VET provisions, based on the metals industry, is the most relevant for small business. A curriculum focus for small enterprises probably needs to develop a firmer understanding of what influences their participation. For example, when the data on enterprise commitment to training is compared to current policy prescriptions, such as user choice, a mismatch is evident. It seems that enterprises want support and facilitation—not more choice or options (Billett & Cooper 1997). Consequently, part of the process of curriculum development decision-making should address the ways in which these needs can be addressed. There need to be ways of responding to the needs of small enterprises within an appropriate industry framework or cross-industry framework. The approach which suits large enterprises and which is industry-based is inappropriate for small business.

It is noteworthy that significant increases in enterprise engagement in VET have been achieved when facilitation and support have been available to both small and large enterprises. The now defunct National Employment and Training Taskforce (NETTFORCE) provided the very kind of facilitation and support which small business, in particular seems to be demanding (Billett et al. 1997). This type of support, together with financial assistance, seems as likely as anything else to enhance participation. What is at question here is whether government will continue with its market-based approaches which are demonstrably failing to secure their goals. It seems that neither user choice nor market-based approaches for organising VET programs are likely to secure small business commitment. User choice is not what small businesses appear to want. Market-based approaches to VET focus on mass markets, rather than tailoring provisions for individuals who are widely dispersed and often unable to gather in small numbers.

The role of the publicly funded VET system needs to be extended to accommodate the shortcomings of the industry-led process and assist and enable individuals to secure important national and personal economic and social goals through facilitation and support. In this way then, the VET system and the State may also have more opportunity to achieve not only their economic, but also their social and equity goals.

Gender and equity issues for women in small business and VET

Concerns about inequity in the training market becoming further entrenched as a result of competition have been raised by Barnett (ANTA 1997a, p.94). The issue of fees is one example of this. Another is a belief on the part of private training providers that equity is not their responsibility (Barnett & Wilson 1995).

Burton (1995) found that although the literature clearly illustrates that women owner/managers 'face different circumstances and additional barriers in establishing and operating small business . . . discussions with various providers and administrators or small business assistance programs revealed a significant level of suspicion about whether women in fact required different services' (Burton 1995, p.787). Burton (1995) cites Canadian, United Kingdom and Australian research which indicates women in small business experience differential treatment on all sides: creditors, suppliers, customers and even employees (Burton 1995, p.789).

McIntyre (in Ferrier & Anderson 1998) outlines some general problems with the construction of 'equity' in national VET policy. These are concerned with a limited understanding of the fact that disadvantage is localised and unequally distributed. He claims policy treats equity in tokenistic terms. Referring to Butler and Lawrence's (1996) assertion, he proposes that the VET system fails to recognise that the burden of achieving equity outcomes is not evenly shared across VET systems or across institutes or networks of provision, and providers are not necessarily resourced to achieve such outcomes.

McIntyre (1998) claims this failure to see inequity as a phenomenon which is both localised and differentiated, as well as compound, is parallelled by a failure to recognise the local and regional nature of education, training markets and labour markets. He concludes that equity should not be allowed to be a casualty of competition policy, that it is not a manifestation of the 'community service obligations' of public providers, and that it can be an outcome which is competitively provided for. This is critical for women in small business, if they are to have the opportunity to access relevant and accredited training at times and in places that accommodate their lives, and not only the system's needs. It also means taking on board the reality and requirements of women business operators—their worlds of work, and the integration of work/family demands.

Identifying equity as an issue

The Queensland Department of Tourism, Small Business and Industry (1996) study discusses gender-related problems which make it difficult for women to operate and expand a successful small business (p.25). These include:

- having less formal managerial experience than men in the first place
- experiencing role conflicts in their dual roles as carer and business owners
- not receiving active family support
- experiencing credibility problems in the eyes of suppliers, clients, financiers and service providers

Although Barrett's (1997) interviewees did not name it as such, they provided evidence of direct and indirect discrimination in their business dealings. These included put downs, not being taken seriously, sexual harassment and the exclusionary effect of industry culture on their ability to participate fully in their field of operations. Participants also spoke of lack of understanding of work and family pressures.

The women themselves did not identify these issues as discrimination. Their responses to the experiences included finding a comfortable niche within an industry, keeping operations at a relatively low level, minimising the effects of harassment, and denying the fact that these experiences had anything to do with the fact that they were women.

Yellow Pages Australia (1996) found the same phenomenon of women asserting that their gender did not hamper their ability to conduct their business (68%). However, further probing revealed that whether women are initially inclined to admit it or not, they are well aware of disadvantages they have to deal with because they are women:

- 53 per cent agreed that there is still a lot of prejudice against women proprietors (42% disagree)
- 53 per cent found they had to work harder to prove themselves (versus 41%)

Overall, two-thirds of women interviewed had experienced barriers to success. Among other manifestations, they identified male chauvinism (20%), discriminatory treatment by banks (13%), perceptions that women lack knowledge/technical skills (11%).

Most people have a range of responsibilities which are not connected with their working life. These other responsibilities include family, community service, care-giving, and so on. Although the women in Barrett's study (1997) did not feel they should get any special consideration to help them balance their work and family responsibilities, it was clear from the discussion that these responsibilities make it difficult for them to undertake training. Others said family responsibilities had prevented them from keeping their skills up-to-date to the extent that they had not been able to enter the workforce after they had completed their initial VET training.

Minimisation of women's skills and activities

Barrett (1997) identified a phenomenon among her focus group participants where people did not really consider themselves to be in business even though they were dependent on their activity for income and survival. This mirrors the conclusions of many researchers in investigating women and issues relating to skills. This phenomenon, known as 'minimisation' is well documented (Cox & Leonard 1991; Poynton & Lazenby 1992). It is one of the ways that women's marginalisation is perpetuated even in a climate of change.

The same tendency to 'minimise' their activity and achievements appears to apply to women operating businesses. One interpretation is that women believe that they are 'not serious' because they may not want to grow their business, but also that they internalise and perhaps accept minimisation of what they do. This is often reinforced by the political and policy positioning of small business within a larger and alienating industry sector, where small business operators, especially if they are women, have little or no 'voice'.

These views are reinforced by the VET system and even by equal opportunity debate and initiatives within it. What, for instance, is the underlying message when equity measures with respect to women and VET are so often concentrated on recruiting women into 'non-traditional' industries? Cheron-Sauer (1995, p.14) claims this approach reflects

> *the dominant view that work traditionally performed by women is of little value and consists generally of low or unskilled work and that it continues to confirm the low status position of such work in the occupational hierarchy of the labour market and to uphold the view that women are only marginal to important areas of the primary labour market.*

Maintaining equity in a VET marketplace

Some of the above may be explained by the fact that, as Barnett and Wilson (1995) point out, equity measures in VET are concentrated in the public (TAFE) sector. In fact, they found that private providers, while expressing a commitment to equity as a priority, also express a belief that it is not their responsibility to attend to it. Barnett (1993) also observed that private providers are actively targeting women (because of TAFE's long history of training provision in the trades-based areas, and because of cheaper infrastructure associated with providing training in more traditional women's areas). These two factors could

explain why formal equity measures are so heavily focussed on getting women into non-traditional areas, despite the growth and opportunity offered in the feminised service areas and the comparative lack of accredited training in such areas. This also links in with Still and Mortimer's (1994) assertion that institutions respond to cultural dilemmas by incorporating 'outgroups' with minimal disruption to the existing system.

As discussed earlier, the approach to equity in VET promoted by ANTA is highly problematic (e.g. Butler 1997a, 1998a). McIntyre and Kimberley (1998 forthcoming) also argue that ANTA's newly developed categories of disadvantage and the move towards identifying disadvantaged individuals rather than disadvantaged groups is problematic, and marginalises women. Little enough of the large scale, high profile research (ABS included) gives any sort of gender breakdown as it is. However, the approach we do have at least allows us to start asking equity-related questions about where to look next and how to proceed. While statistics are not good at identifying individuals, they do offer data about categories (i.e. groups). With the move to a more individualised system, the question of how to monitor equity for individuals is becoming increasingly urgent.

A conception for learning and curriculum for small business

As noted above, there is now an acceptance that individuals learn much of what is required for vocational performance while engaged in workplace activities. Moreover, this type of learning may be the only form of development that many women in small business can access. The problems of access to educational provisions and arrangements fall perhaps most heavily on those who have other and significant non-work-based responsibilities (e.g. family), who are working in isolation (e.g. small business or self-employed individuals) and for whom there is no compatible educational program (Billett 1994a).

Women in small business are probably the most unlikely cohort to be able to locate and access appropriate educational provisions. Even the current fashion of text-based flexible delivery appears to offer little in the way of assistance. Text-based instructional material intended to be used generically may not be applicable in particular circumstances, and the contextualisation which is best provided by an expert-other (e.g. teacher) is becoming less readily accessible because of cost factors. The contextualisation issue appears particularly important for small business skills.

Although there may be a set of generic skills associated with small business (e.g. business planning, bookkeeping, customer relationships, etc.) how these generic skills are used in particular situations are likely to differ according to the nature of the small business and the situation it operates in (Beven 1998; Stevenson 1996). It seems that work performance has situational factors. Therefore, what it means to be an expert differs across workplaces. For example, in a study of hairdressers (Billett 1995) it was shown that the requirements to be successful varied across different settings (e.g. to give a trendy cut and colour; to manage to maintain the clients' business through a rural recession; to be a friend and confidant to elderly clients and to manage clients who were very demanding of the hairdressers).

The difficulty here is that taught courses and books are unlikely to be able to provide the guidance required for women (or men) small business operators to

best learn the required knowledge in a way that is effective for their business. The following sections offer a view about learning and then curriculum for learning small business knowledge which is drawn from empirical work. The attempt here is to offer an account of how learning as part of everyday activity in small businesses can be organised. This account suggests that there are both strengths and weaknesses to learning through everyday activity and a curriculum for workplace learning needs to draw on the strengths and inhibit the weaknesses (Billett 1996a). The two key elements of the approach to curriculum advanced here are 'activities' and 'guidance'. But first, it is necessary to consider the nature of learning.

Learning as part of everyday activity

Learning occurs in places other than in educational institutions. The fact that the major professions of law, medicine and accountancy all require extensive periods of workplace experience indicates that workplace experience is not just valued in the trades. However, there remains a common belief that learning as part of everyday activity in situations such as workplaces is somehow ad hoc or incidental (Marsick & Watkins 1990). Yet, it seems that the quality of learning outcomes, whether in the workplace or in the educational institution, is influenced by the sorts of activities individuals engage in and the kind of guidance they receive.

Learning is the construction and reinforcement of the knowledge we use in our lives. As a process it is analogous to the problem-solving we do continually throughout our lives, thousands of times a day. Most of that learning is reinforcing what we know. For instance, our daily journey to work is likely to be influenced by the time of day we travel, and the simple operations we perform (catching buses, switching on an electrical appliance or changing gears in the car) will result in a particular outcome. Even with these routine activities we make adjustments to our route to work, our way of responding to particular individuals, of working with equipment, to secure improved results.

We also engage in non-routine activities (such as going to a different place, performing a different task, working on a different or new piece of equipment). This demands that we do things differently in seeking to secure our goals. Activity of this type is more demanding and consciously focussed than routine activities and results in the further extension of our knowledge. Depending on the outcome, this learning may be viewed as desirable or undesirable. For example, a new approach to dealing with customers might result in their rejection of the business. So a rich learning experience which has created new knowledge may have negative consequences, even if only in the short term.

The important point here is that learning is the result of engaging in goal-directed activity through everyday work activities. These activities provide combinations of routine and non-routine activities from which we secure and reinforce our knowledge (Billett 1995). It is the combinations of activities we engage in that determine what we learn, not whether these are parts of a formalised curriculum. Furthermore, it seems that one of the problems with transferring knowledge directly from educational institutions to workplaces, such as small businesses, is that the knowledge-creating activities are of a different kind (Billett 1998).

However, although not faced with the transfer problem which confronts educational institutions, workplaces themselves present major problems with

the development of the knowledge required for workplace performance. A series of Australian studies has been undertaken to understand further how expertise can be developed in workplaces through workplace participation. Studies in coal mining (Billett 1992, 1993a), retail, secondary processing, transport, service, hospitality, warehousing (Billett 1993b), secondary processing plant (Billett 1994a), hairdressing (Billett 1995) and other industries (Harris et al. 1996; Harris & Volet 1997) have identified both the strengths and weaknesses of learning in workplaces.

The strengths of learning in workplaces identified in these studies include:

- the development of procedural, some propositional (factual) knowledge and the development of dispositions (attitudes and values) which are necessary for workplace performance
- workplace activities providing authentic goal-directed activities that press workers into learning which extends and reinforces their knowledge
- both direct and indirect guidance is available
- everyday experiences reinforce the development of knowledge through engagement in routine problem-solving

Conversely, the limitations of everyday participation identified by Billett (1996a) include:

- not all forms of knowledge accessed in workplaces are desirable (bad work habits, dangerous practice, inexpedient short-cuts etc.)
- difficulty of problem-solving for increasingly complex or non-routine tasks
- access to expert others is limited by availability, credibility and reluctance
- absence of expertise (they are not there to assist)
- making explicit what knowledge is hidden (opaqueness)
- an over-reliance on instructional media

These findings inform views about workplace learning and curriculum provisions for small business. In particular, they suggest that although workplaces provide rich experiences by which to develop knowledge, the structuring of those experiences and the provision of guidance by more experienced others (local experts, those in similar fields) is likely to be useful in developing particular knowledge. However, in many small businesses there may be no immediate access to expert others to guide the development of the knowledge which is so important for its operation. It may well be that this is the factor that makes networking so significant for women small business owners.

A learning curriculum for small business

In advancing a model of curriculum for the workplace from the discussion above, two requirements emerge. These are for a consideration of the activities that the business operator or their employees, as learners, need to engage in, and the sorts of guidance they require. Some structure and organisation for learning, albeit minimal and unobtrusive, is likely to be required in order to maximise the contribution of what is furnished by everyday activities. The concept of the 'learning curriculum' has been advanced as a means of organising workplace curriculum (Billett 1996a, 1996b; Lave 1990).

The workplace 'learning curriculum' comprises identifying a pathway of activities sequenced from peripheral participation to full participation (i.e. low accountability to high levels of accountability with workplace tasks). The

structuring of this approach to workplace curriculum is based on individuals' learning through everyday participation in the workplace and seeks to accommodate the exigencies of workplaces. The features of this model are:

- access to the product (outcomes—goals desirable for success in the small business) as well as the process (how the small business tasks need to be undertaken)
- care with the sequencing of experiences (not too much too soon—making sure the task is not outside of what the learner can manage without some assistance)
- close guidance by experts and others to support the development of procedures and making accessible conceptual knowledge which might otherwise be hidden
- ongoing direct and indirect interaction with experts and other workers

Conclusion

This report has drawn on a review of recent research and literature to highlight that both small business and women are of increasing significance to VET. However, both the needs of small business and, in particular, the needs of women in small business, are complex. Moreover, they have not been well served by policy that was premised on the needs of large enterprises and which failed to account for the needs, goals and constraints of women in small business. Fundamentally, the goals for and content of courses and learning arrangements under current VET provisions do not adequately address the needs of women in small business.

However, if vocational education and training provisions in Australia can find ways to accommodate the needs and diversity of small business and women, in its training efforts and curriculum frameworks, this will be of benefit to all. It will also enhance the achievement of the aims of the national system. This is the challenge at a time when that system is seeking to be responsive to 'demand-side' requirements. Is the system able to reconcile the differences in the needs of women and small business? If not, then it does not auger well for vocational education and training in Australia, given the increasing diversity and complexity of trends highlighted in the report. At one level, the response required is that of living up to governmental goals—of being responsive to client needs—at another it is a matter of political will that the needs both of small business and women in small business can be met through VET provisions.

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Appendix 1

Barrett 1997, *Women training for transitions: Enhancing VET for women's business involvement*, Sunshine Coast University, Maroochydore.

Findings from Barrett

Barrett (1997) draws conclusions which are both explicit and implied. Both types bear further investigation or verification through reference to other work. Explicit conclusions drawn by Barrett include the following:

Training for and within small business

Participants made similar observations about small business training as participants had in other studies. These are:

- that content is sometimes out-of-date or based on big business examples
- women had a preference for training which addressed their own perceived weak areas
- small business courses were identified as very important resources by people without formal trades (self-confidence was specifically mentioned here)

With regards to original VET training, the following emerged:

- it was considered not to have sufficiently addressed general or specific business skills (most participants with trades qualifications felt that their preparation for the trials of small business life had been through means other than their original VET training

Learning preferences

In general, participants place a high value on the 'hands-on' aspects of their training (whether this had been as part of a formal course or through informal means). In addition, they tended to be more satisfied with the training they had received for creating the product or service around which their business was based, than with their business management training.

A variety of logistical issues were raised by the subjects which included:

- session times
- total time required
- distance
- notion of running a business (image of themselves—both skills, and area)
- fragmentation of courses—lack of coherent vision of outcomes

Personal preferences also included:

- that business people rather than academics run courses
- considerable suspicion of government bodies

Barrett's work also suggests less clearly identified matters. Because of the qualitative nature of that work, it was not appropriate to draw firm conclusions about these matters. One of Barrett's clearly stated intentions was to 'include quote here about being true to what people said'. This is the duty of the qualitative researcher and provides the crux of the important link between qualitative and quantitative work.

Those less explicit outcomes of the interviews and focus group discussions include:

- evidence of both direct and indirect discrimination against women which is similar to that which they experience as employees
- not being taken seriously
- sexual harassment
- lack of understanding of work and family issues
- the exclusionary effects of industry culture

Curriculum issues

Barrett (1997) does not always clearly delineate between when participants are talking about their original VET training and when they are talking about more recent training. For this reason, statements about curricula need to be treated with caution as some will relate to VET training at some time in the past, and some will have more recent relevance. Barrett points out that people's comments about what was lacking in training coincides with their personal views about their own weak areas.

However, there is agreement with other studies in what sorts of areas business managers feel were not adequately dealt with in early training. These include:

- 'people' side of business
- time management
- attention to waste
- accounting
- superannuation
- legalities of hiring
- general area of obligations to the public and to government (tax, occupational health and safety etc.)

A general criticism of small business management courses is that they often use examples from big business and that these often have no direct relevance to participants.

The assertion again arose that as much or more business management skill comes from 'street knowledge' as from formal training. One of the most valuable aspects of formal training was the opportunities for networking which were part of the process. The main benefits of this were sharing skills and relieving isolation.

Two broad categories of informal learning were identified:

- personal activities
- observing
- reading
- developing organisational skills

- empathy and caring
- asking questions
- outreach activities
- talking to employees, suppliers, competitors
- attending conferences, information nights, trade exhibitions, etc., and involvement in community and sporting groups

Discrimination

Although interviewees did not name it as such, they reported instances of direct and indirect discrimination in their business dealings. These included put-downs, sexual harassment and the effect of industry culture on their ability to participate fully in their field of operations. Participants also spoke of the difficulties associated with balancing work and family responsibilities but did not feel they deserved any special consideration in dealing with these.

Not surprisingly, the women themselves did not identify these issues as discrimination and their responses to the experiences included finding a comfortable niche within and industry, keeping operations at a relatively low level, minimising the effects of harassment.

Other responsibilities

Most people have a range of responsibilities which are not connected with their working life. These include family, community, care-giving etc. Although the women in Barrett's study didn't feel they should get any special consideration to help them balance work and family responsibilities, it was clear from the discussion that these responsibilities make it difficult for them to undertake training. Others said family responsibilities had prevented them from keeping their skills up-to-date to the extent that they hadn't been able to enter the workforce after they had completed their initial VET training.

Set-up motivation and business intentions

Participants in the Barrett's (1997) surveys spoke of a hobby growing into a viable business, needing to accommodate family responsibilities and a desire to work on a variety of projects as reasons for setting up a business. Whether these indicate unplanned or non-strategic decision-making is debateable. Certainly in the sense of business being about growth, profit maximisation and market share they may appear so, but another perspective might suggest very strategic decision-making in terms of having a reasonable income which allows room for other aspects of life, and enables an individual to exercise a large degree of control on their working life. Barrett uses the notion of push and pull factors to differentiate when a decision to set up a business is strategic and when it is not.

One of the major contradictions in the literature is an assertion that women don't plan their small business start-up i.e. that they're not strategic, and another that they do very thorough planning and this is why their survival rate is better than men's.

Appendix 2

Meeting notes from Hooper 1998

Hooper 1998, notes regarding Women in Small Business management seminars and workshops for women owner/managers of small business, Small Business Training Centre, Adelaide Institute of TAFE, South Australia 1997.

Courses conducted in Berri, Whyalla, Port Pirie, Adelaide, Port Adelaide, Mt Gambier, Port Lincoln.

Six hundred participants—evaluation being conducted now (six months after completion).

Prior to developing course content, consultations were conducted to ask women what they wanted from a list of what was possible (rough training needs analysis). The only place where this wasn't done (Port Adelaide) had much poorer attendance than everywhere else.

Women said the best thing was meeting other women and facilitating networking opportunities and establishing strategic alliances. Getting information was secondary to that. Liz Hooper's perception was that women were desperate to meet other women. And that means courses delivered remotely won't offer this vital component. She also said this is one of the positives from a women-only group—they actually don't know each other already (even in country centres). She said women are good at maintaining family and social networks but that there's often a great reluctance around business ones.

She said initially business women will say they don't experience anything different from men or have different needs from men. But it doesn't take much probing to get them to list a whole range of things which are specific to women.

Some observations about the course and what women want:

- accreditation is not important initially but once women have some accredited modules under their belt they become more interested in adding to these to gain a certificate
- networking is a more valued outcome than getting information
- programs are best run by business women or those with a really good understanding of the practical pressures
- prefer six short sessions to longer ones covering more than one topic
- more likely to pay per module than for a full course (this course was $40 per module. Liz found that when the option was $240 for a course covering six modules, women were more likely to seek the approval of someone else before they could do it—more autonomous in spending the smaller amount. Also provided a way of assessing the usefulness of the course without having to make a huge financial commitment up front)

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