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Making training work for women

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Executive summary

This report, commissioned as part of the research project Packaging Training for Gender Equity, is a qualitative focus group study of women's experiences in the current vocational education and training (VET) system. It identifies critical factors for women's success in VET and suggests strategies for training providers and brokers in relation to these. Implications for new training arrangements, including New Apprenticeships and User Choice, and for further policy development, are also discussed.

Focus groups were conducted across five States and Territories and in three industries: community services and health; building and construction; and information technology and telecommunications. Groups were selected to represent the entire range of publicly funded VET provision across technical and further education (TAFE), community and private training providers, employers and schools. The study included a literature review and interviews with training providers, employers and other stakeholders.

The study examined reasons women gave for entering training and the outcomes they hoped to achieve, their experiences of information provision, selection and enrolment and both facilitating factors and obstacles to ongoing participation. Experiences of off-the-job and workplace assessment were also canvassed.

Reasons for undertaking training and desired outcomes

Women in this study were participating in training to improve their chances of employment, to upgrade current qualifications and expertise, and to change or restart careers. Women's goals recognised both the 'education' and 'training' aspects of VET and often reflected a lifelong learning focus. The study did not provide evidence of one, employer driven, 'training market' for VET.

Course information, selection and enrolment

Success strategies identified for training providers and brokers included:

- ❖ information dissemination using a range of strategies to reach diverse groups

- ❖ routine provision of information and, where possible, support for training pathways both into and beyond the current course
- ❖ provision of multiple entry and exit points for longer courses
- ❖ collection of detailed data on course applicants and intakes by equity groups, and development of strategies to increase representation, including a data file of sources of equity expertise
- ❖ provision of course information well before commencement, including delivery, costs, locations and times of training
- ❖ selection processes which collect only directly relevant information
- ❖ selection criteria monitored for indirect discrimination against relevant legislation
- ❖ use and extension of recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes

Varied and targetted dissemination strategies require adequate resourcing and expertise in how to reach the target group. Sources of information were particularly important in emerging and non-traditional industries.

Many participants had previously undertaken other forms of entry-level training, and providers were concerned with the loss of 'first step' entry-level training under new arrangements. Multiple entry and exit points for courses were identified as desirable to provide flexibility in entry criteria, and enable completion of a higher level qualification to be broken into stages.

Selection processes varied widely, but there were instances of elaborate information requirements in which data were not subsequently used, and of selection criteria which could be viewed as indirectly discriminatory.

Support, delivery and learning experiences

Success strategies identified for training providers and brokers included:

- ❖ provision of staffing resources for student support, development of student contact and support networks, and workplace mentoring and support
- ❖ course planning to minimise costs, and flexible fee paying schedules
- ❖ early provision of information about and orientation to support services
- ❖ provision of time at training locations for students to use support facilities
- ❖ delivery design to minimise the use of multiple locations with early starting and late finishing times and accelerated delivery schedules
- ❖ flexibility for participants to leave and rejoin courses where necessary
- ❖ opportunities for students to share and discuss experiences and learning
- ❖ continuing efforts to eliminate gender-related discrimination and harassment

Participants most frequently mentioned personal support as a factor in successful ongoing participation in training. Support and encouragement from training provider staff, students, employers, work colleagues and family provide reassurance of achievement and direction, reminders of

goals and confirmation of the value of learning for the individual and the enterprise.

Wage and income support levels were reported as the major obstacle to ongoing participation in training, often in association with the costs of training, transport and child care. Some women were working additional hours for their employer outside traineeship arrangements, or in second jobs, to augment their income.

Most groups had some access to libraries and computers, literacy and numeracy assistance, and academic and personal counselling, but few had time to use them, due to limited time at the training provider location. Students in private provider courses had reduced access to such resources and services.

Success factors in off-the-job learning were the opportunity to share learning with other students and supportive staff, and in on-the-job learning were workplace learning support and activities with immediate relevance. For women in emerging and non-traditional areas, managing gender-related experiences with curriculum and with male staff, is a demanding aspect of the 'work' of course participation.

Assessment experiences

Success strategies identified for training providers and brokers included:

- ❖ varied forms of off-the-job assessment, including practical assessment
- ❖ workplace assessment which provides clarity about the assessment task, prior rehearsal and coaching in the workplace, student control of what is assessed and when, and the opportunity for retesting
- ❖ monitoring of assessment practice, especially for employer assessment in small workplaces and where an assessment culture has yet to develop
- ❖ consideration of the practical and ethical suitability of some workplace assessment environments, in relation to safety or client privacy issues

Overall, the study found less workplace assessment and employer involvement than expected. Issues identified included the need for an 'assessment culture' to develop in organisations, reluctance by small employers to be involved in assessment, and some instances of unsatisfactory practice. In off-the-job assessment, most successful forms were workplace related projects or practical assignments. Least successful and useful were tests, especially where they were the dominant form of assessment.

Broad policy implications

This study offers some information on how recent changes to the VET system may affect women. A more fundamental policy challenge remains; to recognise that two-thirds of VET clients are identified as members of one or more of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) targetted equity groups (Golding, Volkoff & Ferrier 1997) and to acknowledge

'equity' groups as the principal clients of VET rather than as marginalised outsiders.

Many new arrangements under the National Training Framework (NTF) were identified as success factors for women in this study, including links to employment, immediate relevance of training, competency-based learning and assessment requirements directly linked to employment competencies, and training which enabled participants with unsatisfactory school experiences to begin a career path.

The study did however identify some issues which have implications for the continued implementation of new training arrangements, including New Apprenticeships and User Choice.

Policy issue: Access

The study provides evidence that access to and participation in training are profoundly affected by women's family responsibilities and patterns of part-time and interrupted labour force participation, often in insecure employment. 'Entry-level' training is accessed by adult women returning to the workforce or in industries and occupations where training has only recently become available. Over-reliance on traineeships with a 'training wage' component will exclude those women who cannot afford to drop back to the traineeship wage. This issue intersects with the increased complexity of training arrangements involving multiple sites and providers, which create difficulties for adult women with family responsibilities and low incomes.

Issue: Advice needs to be provided to industry training advisory bodies (ITABs), training brokers and providers on the development of alternative pathways into entry-level training for women, including part-time traineeships. It is desirable that full-time New Apprenticeships with a training wage not be the only entry-level pathway into occupations.

Evidence from the study suggests that access to training for groups of women identified in the National Women's VET Strategy is an issue needing further attention. Few providers in this study saw multiple disadvantaged women as their target group and were attempting to recruit or support them. Key stakeholders, training providers and training participants suggested that employer-based selection processes may replicate existing patterns of occupational access, including existing inequities. The question is how to most effectively 'disturb' these existing patterns.

Issue: Consideration needs to be given to the potential for brokers and providers of training to develop strategies which could enhance affirmative action, with some additional funding and equity support for this.

The loss of labour market programs as pathways into traineeship training was of particular concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and for multiple disadvantaged women, women re-entering the workforce or entering after low levels of school attainment.

Issue: Accredited traineeship programs at Certificate 1 or 2 designed to cater for entrants who have been unemployed or have special needs, and which articulate with higher level traineeships, need to be recognised as a policy focus.

Policy issues: Support and delivery

In the VET system, public providers, information literacy services, personal counselling and support for specific needs is generally available. Private providers in this study were much less able to provide such services. Access to facilities at both public and private providers was also diminished by structural arrangements, where participants had little time available at training locations.

Issue: Access to and use of libraries and other information literacy resources needs to be monitored under new training arrangements, especially in training which articulates with further VET and university courses.

Another element of support identified as critical was personal support, in terms of confirmation that learning is 'on the right track', and reassurance of achievement for women not confident of their learning skills. This kind of support is not an 'extra' in the training process; it makes the difference between success and failure.

Issue: The provision of adequate personal support for students by training provider staff should be an element of quality criteria for course delivery tenders, and should be included in the professional development materials in training packages.

Women showed high levels of interest in planning career and further education paths from their current training but found it difficult to access information. Providers and key stakeholders also emphasised the need to make information on pathways available through training packages.

Issue: Pathways information needs to be built into training packages, possibly as part of the 'qualification levels' section of the endorsed components of a training package. Mechanisms are also needed to disseminate this information.

The study findings confirm that 'flexibility' in delivery is contested terrain and suggests that some elements of new training arrangements may decrease flexibility for women as clients.

Issue: There is a need to monitor the availability of 'flexible delivery' in terms of choices for course participants. Arrangements for participants to exit and re-enter courses must also be built into delivery arrangements wherever possible.

Policy issues: Assessment

There is a need for more information on workplace and employer assessment, especially in emerging and non-traditional areas. The shift to employer assessment may be slow and uneven, and may require considerable provider support.

Issue: Further research is required to evaluate the impact on women's participation and outcomes of assessment against standards by workplace assessors. This could be done as part of the ANTA review of training package implementation.

1 Introduction

Project brief

In 1997, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), the Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs Vocational Education, Employment and Training (MCEETYA VEET) Women's Taskforce, commissioned a research project under the standards and curriculum component of the National Women's Vocational Education and Training Strategy. This was one of a number of projects covering all aspects of the strategy. The brief of this project was to identify critical factors in standards development and training provision, which can improve women's access to and successful participation in vocational education and training (VET). The factors were to be considered in the context of the Australian Recognition Framework (ARF) and new training arrangements.

Packaging training for gender equity (Courtenay, Mawer & Connole 1997) addressed areas of critical importance in new training arrangements designed to improve relevance and responsiveness. Competency standards are the lynch-pins of training packages and their quality will have a major effect on all other package components. Similarly, the capacity of VET provision to cater for the full diversity of its clientele, including women, will be a major determinant of the ultimate success of the new National Training Framework (NTF) arrangements.

Project components

This report addresses the project components dealing with women's experiences in the current VET system, using a qualitative methodology. Its aim was to identify the critical factors for women's success, with particular reference to access to VET, selection, enrolment, delivery and outcomes. The study included:

- ❖ a literature search and review, leading to a draft summary report to identify critical factors to the success of women in VET
- ❖ preliminary interviews of selected key stakeholders with relevant industry and provider expertise
- ❖ focus group discussions with a representative sample of women currently in education and training in selected industries across the VET sector

- ❖ interviews with training providers and employers associated with the focus groups

The overall project (Courtenay, Mawer & Connole 1997) also involved a review of competency standards and training package development across five industries, aimed at enhancing the quality and gender inclusiveness of competency standards. The findings and recommendations of this component of the project are contained in the report by Courtenay and Mawer (1997).

Background to the study

This study was carried out against a background of recent Commonwealth Government initiatives in VET, including the implementation of training packages, consisting of a core of competency standards, qualification levels and assessment guidelines, which will be endorsed by the NTF committee of ANTA. Packages may also include a non-endorsed component of learning strategies, assessment materials and professional development materials. The implementation of training packages is supported by the ARF, in which training providers will be registered on the basis of nationally agreed quality assurance principles, rather than upon provision of accredited courses which was formerly the case. New Apprenticeships will extend current apprenticeship and traineeship entry-level training, involving a contract of training with an employer. User Choice funding mechanisms will allow employers, in conjunction with trainees, to choose training providers for publicly funded training. Further discussion of these changes and their implications for women can be found in the companion report (Courtenay & Mawer 1997).

This study was planned as an identification of factors important for women to be successful in the current VET system, in order to provide advice on needs and issues for women, which are relevant to the changes currently being implemented. For this reason, the sample of focus groups selected included a strong representation of traineeship groups and groups with considerable workplace learning and assessment components in their training, and a lower representation of mainstream training and further education (TAFE) provision.

For the study of women's experiences in VET three industries were chosen, one from each category of industry groups outlined in the National Women's VET Strategy, as follows:

- ❖ an industry where women are a high percentage of the workforce: community services and health, which is a growing industry where women comprise 78 per cent of the workforce
- ❖ a growth industry where women are a low percentage of the workforce: building and construction, where women make up 15 per cent of the workforce
- ❖ a currently emerging industry: information technology (IT) and telecommunications, where women are 36 and 31 per cent of the workforce respectively

Focus groups were conducted in five States and Territories; New South Wales, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Victoria, with 14 groups and a total of 116 participants. Groups were selected to represent, as far as possible, the entire range of publicly funded VET provision across TAFE, community and private training providers, employers and schools, and across the three industries chosen for the study.

The sample also included representation of particular groups identified in the National Women's VET Strategy: non-English-speaking background (NESB) women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with a disability, rural and isolated women, and women in transition, for example, from school to work or mature-age women (re)-entering the workforce.

It proved very difficult to access groups of women in building and construction and, as a result of this, a broader range of trade students was drawn upon in the final sample.

The sample illustrates the rapidly diversifying nature of current training arrangements and contained the following focus groups:

- ❖ in community services, eight groups and 72 participants including:
 - two traineeship groups, one in child care, with a private provider and employment through a group training scheme, and one in a health occupation with a TAFE provider and private sector small business employers
 - two groups of employed women, in community management with a community provider and TAFE articulation, and in volunteer management with a private non-profit provider
 - an accredited labour market program for assistants in nursing in aged care, with articulation to a traineeship, with a private provider
 - two TAFE child-care courses, a diploma by full flexible delivery and a Certificate 3 course for Aboriginal women
 - a group of rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with a TAFE provider, some in indigeneous and community welfare and some in access courses
- ❖ in IT and telecommunications, three groups and 19 participants, including:
 - a telecommunications 'cadet' group employed by a large telecommunications enterprise with TAFE as provider at advanced diploma level
 - a large TAFE information technology course, with multiple exit points and provision for re-entry
 - a TAFE course in computer applications for Year 12 school students at Certificate 1 level
- ❖ in non-traditional trades, two groups and 19 participants, including:
 - a women-only pre-vocational course across electronics, engineering and automotive trades, run through a private provider with both TAFE and the private provider delivering elements of the course
 - a mixed trades group, predominantly in building and construction, with some automotive and horticulture students, and TAFE providers

- one group of six participants especially for women with disabilities, with a TAFE provider, and with vocational areas, including retail, veterinary nursing and computing

For each focus group, a training provider and, where possible, an employer, were interviewed. Both focus groups and interviews gathered data on women's reasons for undertaking training, the outcomes they were aiming to achieve, and their experiences of accessing training, participation and assessment.

The sample is broadly representative of women in VET, in relation to level of qualification, provider types, geographic and rural/urban coverage and representation of specific groups of women. It is limited by its small size, its focus on only three industries and by the absence of women in fully on-the-job training with an enterprise provider. Further details of the methodology and sample composition can be found in Appendix 1.

This report is organised into three chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study and briefly reviews some of the background literature. Chapter 2 presents the information gathered from focus groups, training providers and employers. It examines participants' reasons for undertaking training and the outcomes they hoped to achieve and identifies success factors in accessing training, ongoing participation and successful outcomes. Chapter 3 discusses the implications of the study and identifies issues for further policy development.

Findings are discussed separately, where appropriate, for women in community services and for groups in the emerging and non-traditional industries. Findings for the specific focus groups which contained a mix of industries, one group of rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and one group of women with disabilities, have been included with the community services groups, as their courses were either general access or directed at occupations where women are a high proportion of the workforce. Where the discussion refers to 'groups', these are groups of students or trainees.

Literature review

This review has been drawn from publicly available studies listed in Australian VET major databases from 1992 to 1997, and from recent gender equity policy documents (ANTA 1996e; 1996f), and a more general equity document (ANTA 1996d). Material on each of the specific equity groups of women identified in the National Women's VET Strategy is presented in Appendix 3.

It is almost impossible (and highly misleading) to talk about 'women's' experiences as though women were a homogeneous group, or as if their experiences told only one story. The economic and social position of women, and their labour force and training participation, are deeply affected by a complex of social factors including, for example, race and ethnicity, social class and geographic location. Thus women are multiple positioned and some women are multiple disadvantaged. Nevertheless some generalisations can be made about women's participation in the

labour force, and their access to the training system, and about factors that shape and constrain these.

Current gender equity policy is directed by the National Women's VET Strategy, which has been endorsed by the Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers. It is currently being implemented by a range of Commonwealth and State/Territory agencies and its progress will be reported through State training profiles, ANTA's annual report and an annual report on the strategy itself (ANTA 1996e, p.3).

The strategy has four broad outcomes:

- ❖ increase in the number of women completing VET programs
- ❖ increase in the number of women with VET qualifications at all levels
- ❖ women distributed more broadly across fields of study
- ❖ increase in participation and improved outcomes for specific groups of women (these groups are named as NESB women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with a disability, rural and isolated women and women in transition, for example, from school to work or mature-age women [re]-entering the workforce)

The most recent broad equity document from ANTA (1996d) will be considered in the forthcoming revision of the ANTA National Strategy, the key document for VET planning. This document contains a recognition that equal access is inadequate as a measure of equity, and that 'quality participation and successful outcomes' are also central. However, its principles to achieve access and equity are focussed on individuals and their relationships to the VET sector, without direct reference to under-represented groups.

The report sets quantified participation and outcome performance indicators for each identified group, including women. Targets for women as a group are benchmarked against male participation. They require:

- ❖ increased participation and attainment rates of female operative-level employees in structured and accredited training across all industries (particularly emerging industries) to a level proportionate to their male counterparts
- ❖ participation and attainment rates in skilled and professional/para-professional courses on a par with males across all industries

These are ambitious targets and if achieved would represent a very significant improvement in equity for women in VET. They may be difficult to benchmark given the very different proportions of males and females in many industries and their gendered participation patterns, and also given overall gender differences in workplace participation patterns, for example, in full-time versus part-time work. A significant omission in the targets for women relates to their participation in entry-level training and training based on training packages.

Structural progress on gender equity to date is not reassuring. The ANTA (1996g) report on industry VET plans observed that in industry training advisory body (ITAB) training plans access and equity barriers identified tended to be generic and suggested little actual identification of issues. The ANTA (1997c) issues paper on group training and its supplementary paper

on participation in group training (1997b) demonstrate that group training schemes have had very limited success in promoting equitable participation for women.

Current mainstream ANTA policy documents relating to new initiatives in training, demonstrate a certain lack of coherence on equity issues, with some documents setting out good practice in relation to target groups and other documents ignoring this advice altogether. There is also some evidence of attempt to reframe the complex issues of multiple disadvantage by a focus on equity in terms of disembodied 'individuals'.

More fundamentally, the paradigm shift from an implicit male norm to a norm of catering for diversity, repeatedly identified as critical in the literature on gender equity in VET, (Barnett 1993; Mawer & Field 1995; Butler & Lawrence 1996) has not been made. The current approach of distributing a limited amount of additional funding and attention across an ever-widening range of equity target groups positioned as competitors for the label of 'most disadvantaged/deserving' allows the numerical minority of 'normal' male users to continue unchallenged access to an inequitable share of resources. Such an approach cannot deliver 'equity' and confirms Barnett's (1993) disquiet about the effects of an open training market on women's participation in VET.

Women's experience of VET: Research findings and strategies

This review of research literature and practice strategies in relation to women's access, participation and outcomes in VET, is framed around issues raised in a report by the Australian Committee on Training and Curriculum (ACTRAC 1995) as a guide to best practice, and particularly its 'hallmarks' of gender inclusive curriculum. It is acknowledged that the shift in emphasis to workplace delivery will mean that this material will need to be revisited, and some comment is made on this below.

Gender issues in access

Barnett, Foyster and Werner (1996) provide a comprehensive gender analysis of TAFE participation, drawn mostly from 1993 National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) statistics. They conclude that both reasons for study and participation patterns show gender differences. Participation for men is focussed on the relevance of training for employment, and often financially supported by employers. Women less often receive this financial support and their participation is likely to be their own choice. Women also consider their capacity to combine training with other work and family commitments.

Notwithstanding men's greater support, Barnett et al.'s data demonstrate that approximately half of the women in their samples were studying for directly job-related reasons, including to get a job or self-employment, or in relation to a current job or promotion (1996, p.28).

The ACTRAC (1995) 'hallmarks' for access form a useful basis for consideration of access issues at the point of entry to training. They include:

- ❖ Allowance for flexible participation takes into account learners' family responsibilities. This could perhaps be expanded to consider gender and cultural considerations in time and place of delivery (including workplace delivery), access to child care and the need for many women to combine study and work. It needs to be recognised that women may be working in part-time and casual jobs in fields unrelated to their current study or their future career aspirations.
- ❖ Practical and work experience components are accessible to part-time and unemployed learners where possible; where not, adequate alternative arrangements exist. As training becomes more workplace focussed this is an important issue and one which intersects with the considerations of flexibility noted above.
- ❖ All course entry requirements relate only to essential entry competencies. This issue will need attention in contested and highly attractive areas of potential employment, such as IT. It is also an issue in relation to excessive English language requirements.
- ❖ The curriculum is linked to relevant background courses or programs designed to cover assumed knowledge, skills and attitudes. This will become important as workplace and private training providers may be unwilling to either provide or give credit for bridging programs, or engage in full recognition of prior learning (RPL).
- ❖ Course and module design is internally flexible, to allow customisation options for all learners. 'Customisation' is heavily emphasised in current policy, but employer-based customisation may be at the expense of curriculum and arrangements seen as relevant only for a minority.

A particular issue in access and participation is that of 'non-traditional' training in industries and occupations where women have had very low representation, notably in trades. There is a considerable range of evidence concerning barriers to selection of women into non-traditional fields of training, including assumptions about young women's pre-existing skills and competencies (Charon-Sauer 1995), discriminatory attitudes by employers (Lyll & Hawkins 1993; Affirmative Action in Training 1996; ANTA 1996a), and inadequate promotion to employers of women as apprentices and trainees (Lyll & Hawkins 1993; Charon-Sauer 1995). This area has been the subject of considerable research and intervention (Morley 1994a, 1994b, 1994c) but with little effect on participation rates to date.

Gender issues in selection, enrolment and course participation

Selection and enrolment in VET involve the processes of setting entry criteria for courses and training programs, selecting participants in both workplace and institutional settings when qualified applicants exceed places available, and enrolling students in courses, with considerations of RPL and relevant current skills. All of these processes need to be free of gender bias to meet legal and policy requirements.

For entry to TAFE a major barrier has been the retention of selection criteria, especially in maths and science, which are unnecessary for success. The assumption of prior knowledge likely to have been gained through

male socialisation and inadequate bridging from pre-vocational to mainstream training have also been difficulties (Charon-Sauer 1995).

Formal selection processes in TAFE refer to the process of deciding which students will be offered a place when demand from applicants who meet the entry criteria exceed places available. A supplement to the New South Wales *TAFE Gazette* (TAFE New South Wales 1996) outlines issues which need to be considered to avoid discrimination. These include:

- ❖ selection on content of applications, not on language and communication skills, unless these are criteria in themselves
- ❖ awareness that in assessing criteria related to employment, some groups will not have had access to employment, and that evidence of other relevant experience, for example, in the home, can be used. Similar variations can be expected in relation to work experience. Some groups, for example refugees, may not be able to provide documentary evidence
- ❖ completion of previous education and training as a criterion possibly acting as a barrier to those with negative experiences of education, and students whose learning needs have been unsupported. Consideration can be given to current skills and experience, equivalent qualifications to those sought, and informally learned life skills
- ❖ possible cultural differences in relation to setting career goals and intentions, and in relation to knowledge of and interest in a specific industry
- ❖ ability to complete the course should not be judged on criteria such as disability, where an applicant may require a longer period of time for completion

Other materials reviewed (Office of Training and Further Education 1993; VEET Board 1997) reinforce the need for effective communication to women about what training programs will actually involve in terms of time, cost and delivery, what support services are available, including child care, and likely realistic employment outcomes.

It should be noted that almost all of this material derives from a TAFE course environment. Less is known about selection practices in the workplace, except for the overall data on women's lower access reported above. Mawer and Field (1995) detail the barriers which mean that NESB people are less likely to volunteer for or access workplace training, and there are some reports of gender discrimination by employers in selection of workers for training (Bertone 1995).

Gender issues in delivery

The importance of proactive support for students in non-traditional training is emphasised by Charon-Sauer (1995). From the 1997 South Australian State Training Profile reports of consultations with students (not disaggregated by gender), the importance of learning support as vital to success was stressed, and child care and student service support were also seen as important (VEET Board 1997).

Flexible delivery is a major element of current training arrangements. A report by ANTA (1996g) noted that ITABs had agreed that flexibility needed to be defined broadly and should cover entry, program

components, modes of learning; learner control/choice over content sequence, time, place, method of learning, appropriate support systems, application of learning technologies where appropriate, access to information on courses and services, access to appropriate learning resources, and flexible assessment procedures.

Advantages of flexible workplace learning may include a less threatening environment for training in familiar surroundings for many workers (Charon-Sauer 1995), and may have added advantages of convenience and relevance. However, there is a risk that institution or provider-based 'flexible delivery' can become a code for cost-cutting and the withdrawal of services such as child care and student support (Connole & Butler 1995). For employers, 'flexible' may be attractive in terms of self-paced or technology-based learning accessed in the employees' own time. 'Flexible' in the workplace may mean workers informally train other workers, with few learning resources or sources of support (Wilson & Engelhard 1994), and no scrutiny of bias and discrimination in the content or delivery of training.

In workplace settings, flexible delivery may also raise problems around what constitutes 'training' as opposed to 'work', and therefore what should be paid time. The tendency for women service workers to put client service ahead of their training needs, if no replacement is available, (Connole & Hypatia 1994; Bertone 1995) may also reduce access to workplace training.

Gender issues in assessment

The most recent ANTA (1996b) guide to assessment contains a set of key principles, including that 'assessment processes shall be valid, reliable, flexible and fair' and that 'assessment practices shall provide for the recognition of current competencies regardless of where these have been acquired'. The clear commitment to equitable RPL and the recognition of the need for support in the process are useful. The overall equity objective, however, is couched vaguely in terms of 'groups' and gives no indication that discrimination in assessment is an issue to be considered, or of how to overcome it.

ANTA's (1997a) guidelines for training package developers notes the need to provide information on 'use of evidence gathering methods which are gender and culturally inclusive' (1997a, section B, p.18). This criterion is also incorporated in the processes for review and maintenance of assessment materials (1997a, section C, p.17). A bibliography of professional development materials for assessment is provided in this publication. Scrutiny of the two major references (Rumsey 1994; Hagar, Athanasou & Gonczi 1994) reveal references to the need for fairness, (Rumsey 1994, p.21; Hagar et al. 1994, pp.46-47) including gender fairness, but both take the view that such instances may reveal themselves only in the assessment process and not on a systematic basis.

None of this material contains concrete instances of how bias can arise, or of how fairness can be achieved in relation to gender. The impression is one of 'going through the motions' of attention to equity without any real idea of the issues, or any commitment to their resolution. For assessors to

be trained in culture and gender inclusive principles, these need to be spelled out. It would seem that there is need for further research here.

Conclusion

The policy context within which this project is situated is characterised by a demonstrated policy commitment to gender equity in national policy documents themselves, including broad quantitative system-level monitoring of progress towards equity objectives.

Overall however, national policy documents are patchy in their choice and coverage of appropriate equity performance indicators, some of which are imprecise or will be very difficult to monitor. Implementation advice and strategies are often weak, some documents do not allocate responsibility for implementation and there is no indication of any consequences for failure to achieve the targets set.

The research material reviewed in this report is characterised by extensive field-based consultation with policy-makers and training providers and equity experts, supported by quite comprehensive literature reviews. The overall effect of the literature, however, is that of long lists of issues and strategies, some focussed on general equity, some on specific equity groups and some on women, further subdivided by equity groups. There is little sense of prioritisation of the issues and strategies raised. There is not very much material, except for best practice case studies within individual systems or enterprises, on what has actually worked in practice, and there is a dearth of reporting on what actually happened as an outcome of major research reports.

There are also some specific gaps in the literature. In relation to access, the voices of the large group of women, both in and out of employment, who have not been able to gain access to the VET system, are silent here. This group of women will be very diverse, and their issues are very much under-researched.

The information on selection reviewed above refers mainly to the TAFE system, and much less is known about workplace or private provider selection processes. The little data available about workplace practices are not reassuring.

The major issue in delivery raised by this review is the politics of 'flexible'. There is fairly general enthusiasm for the concept of 'flexible delivery' but exactly what this means for different providers and 'clients' and whose views will prevail, is not clear.

Assessment, especially workplace assessment, is an area where there are clear gaps in the literature. Little is known about current practice and more information on how to assess without gender bias is required for practitioners.

As noted earlier, the equity paradigm operative in the VET system is still one of allocating limited amounts of 'equity' to identified groups, while the male norm goes unremarked and uncontested. Responding to this system

on its own terms produces an endlessly shifting and proliferating list of 'issues'. Strategies to address these are then tied to the structural arrangements prevailing in the VET system at the time, in terms of which players shall do what, inside which systems.

In its current form(s), since 1990, the VET system could be likened to a kaleidoscope. Frequent rotations of its elements produce new structural forms and new processes within the same overall boundaries. Each new configuration 'unsettles' the equity issues, which reconfigure into a new shape. In practice this means that policy advice tied to existing structures and processes is often out of date before it can be implemented 'on the ground', overtaken by a fresh set of changes.

Is it time to 'do equity' differently? What many of us have been arguing for, is the system to routinely assume that diversity is what needs to be catered to, and that 'needs' are renegotiated locally at each point of entry. System-wide, this is an insight which has fuelled the previous dissatisfaction with training reform and has led to the current emphasis on regional and enterprise linkages as crucial.

What is required here is that the groups which make up the client base of VET be treated in terms of 'who is this customer' and 'what services are required' (Heller 1997). This is an interactive model of service delivery. In practice, this would require mapping both the composition of the client group and its absences, and undertaking follow-up to remedy the latter. It would attempt to clearly identify the needs of all members of the group, including the unremarked 'normal' members, and allocate resources in a fair manner across the client group. What constitutes 'fairness' thus becomes available to scrutiny.

2 Experiences of vocational education and training

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative study of women's experiences, and the comments of their training providers and employers. The data on factors that relate to success are examined in relation to the following:

- ❖ reasons women gave for entering training and the outcomes they hoped to achieve
- ❖ information gathering, selection and enrolment as aspects of the early stages of the training process
- ❖ facilitating factors and obstacles to ongoing participation, including personal support, income levels, support services, and features of delivery and learning experiences both off the job and in the workplace
- ❖ aspects of off-the-job and workplace assessment

Reasons for undertaking training and desired outcomes

An important context for women's access and participation in VET is the choice to undertake training and the outcomes desired from involvement in training. Participants were asked to comment on what had led them to undertake their course of study, what outcomes they had hoped for and whether these were being achieved. They were also asked whether they had been aware of having a choice of training course or provider and, if so, what factors had led them to choose their current course and provider.

Key findings and success factors

- ❖ The choice to participate in training was strongly related to gaining and retaining employment, and training with real prospects of employment was highly attractive.
- ❖ Almost all participants, including young women, anticipated continuous workforce participation. They recognised the current uncertainty in the labour market and the need for possible changes of occupation and further training.
- ❖ Training, even at entry level, was seen as an important avenue to future career paths and more advanced study.
- ❖ The fact that a course was accredited increased its attractiveness for most participants.

Many employed women wanted qualifications to improve the security of their current employment, or increase both their skills and formal

recognition of these. Some were also retraining in order to change careers. Women seeking employment considered that training would increase their chances, especially among the employers they were placed with in traineeships, group training schemes or work experience.

Another possible reason for undertaking training is where it is required, requested or supported by an employer. With the exception of those who had entered a contract of training for a traineeship or apprenticeship, few employed women reported employer support, a finding consistent with earlier research. A small proportion of participants, notably in child care, reported encouragement from employers to switch from casual employment to a traineeship, thus enabling them to gain qualifications. Some of the community management group also received encouragement for training from employers.

Reasons for training

Many women in community services were entering or engaged in occupations with low rates of pay, high levels of part-time and casual employment and low status, and saw their training as a pathway to occupations with higher status within the industry. They acknowledged that their current occupations, while satisfying in themselves, do not provide the working conditions necessary for lifelong employment.

For young women in traineeship groups in community services, a principal reason for selecting the occupation was being genuinely drawn to the work. However, low occupational status and very low wage rates meant that many acknowledged that it was unlikely to be a long-term choice. Despite enjoying the work, they foresaw eventually having to move on.

I think that the conditions would have to change a lot, the attitude would have to change a lot and the money would have to change a lot ... I'm thinking of my future ... I'm getting married in 10 months and I want to go on and have a family. I want some form of security there. If I can't have that security, then I'd rather find somewhere where I could, regardless of the fact that I like the job that I'm doing. (Health trainee)

Advantages of a traineeship included the opportunity to gain access to pathways that had been unavailable because of low school attainment or broken employment patterns. Community service and health occupations that require university education, notably nursing, community work and teaching were considered as possible next career moves.

Well I'm only doing it because I wanted to do nursing but I didn't finish my (Year 12) which means I couldn't get in and I have to wait until I'm 21 and then if I've got relevant work experience you can get in ... (Health trainee)

Management, including managing a small business in the industry, was also mentioned as an aspiration in some community services groups.

Unemployed women were strongly focussed on gaining employment and were attracted to training that offered some hope of this. For women already in employment, a major reason for undertaking training was to improve the level of service they could provide to clients through

acquiring greater knowledge and experience. This came through strongly in several groups. These findings are consistent with those of Barnett, Foyster and Werner (1996).

a qualification ... quality of the qualification ... to know what to look for in the development of young children and how we can develop their skills ... make a difference in their lives.
(Child-care trainee)

... a consolidation of all the bits that I kind of knew ... and filling in the gaps and just wanting to know where I and my knowledge and skills sat.
(Community management)

Women in IT and telecommunications were more optimistic about their occupations, hoping for well paid and exciting work, or pathways into management.

... the qualifications, the on-the-job experience, also more employable when we came out of it because we'd actually had practical experience ... they were saying in my interview that when they employ people straight from university they have to have a year straight away for settling because they've got no idea of what it's like to work in the industry. The whole idea of this cadetship was to cut down on that.
(Telecommunications cadet)

Training in IT offered hope of work for women seeking employment because it was seen as an expanding field. School students saw the acquisition of some computing skills as useful in the workplace, and some were already using their skills in work experience positions, which they hoped might lead to employment. In the TAFE IT course students also saw the need for lifelong learning in their rapidly-changing field.

Women in non-traditional trade training were attracted to the work itself but anticipated difficulty in continuing to work in their industries due to the hostile climate they encountered. Many planned to set up their own small businesses to overcome this. The pre-vocational students had undertaken their course in order to try out non-traditional trade areas. Most were enjoying the experience and were hoping to find apprenticeships, something their training provider and its group training company were seen as well placed to assist.

Across all groups, when asked whether the fact that the course was accredited was important to them, members indicated that a recognised credential was important.

It does! I mean if you think of leaving or anything like that you have that qualification to take with you so you've always got something to fall back on.
(Health trainee)

I think it's good that it is recognised so that we don't have to do this stuff again and so I think that it's been a really good overview and that by being recognised ... it doesn't seem such a monumental sort of task ... because we have done some of the stuff ...
(Pre-vocational)

Groups also reported a range of personal reasons for undertaking training.

I was getting nothing from school ... only from TAFE ... at school it was just like ... turn up, do the same again and it seems like nothing went in ... but now

they're explaining everything to me and seems like it's just going in and it's just staying there ... (Disability)

Like for where I am now I'm really proud of what I've done to be where I am because ... when I left primary school I didn't know how to add, I didn't even know how to write properly, I could write but I couldn't write what I wanted basically and it was really hard because now in today's society you really need to know your maths and your English and without that you're nowhere.
(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

Choice of training provider

When asked whether they had a choice of training provider, few community services groups were aware of other alternatives to the course they were studying. Members of indigenous groups chose courses designed for their communities over other alternatives. Two other groups were aware of alternative TAFE courses to the private provider or community-based courses they were taking. Reasons for choosing their current course included a shorter duration, perceptions that the course had easier entry requirements, increased on-the-job training and the attraction of a traineeship wage for unemployed participants. One group had also been attracted by the focus in the course brochure on sharing information and experiences with other participants.

All of the IT and telecommunications groups were aware that some choice of training provision was available other than the course they had chosen. For the professional telecommunications group, the form of training was more attractive than a university degree as reported above. The TAFE IT group had chosen their particular institution because of the perceived reputation of the quality of the course. For the young women in a school program at TAFE the attraction over a school-based subject was the greater depth offered, and the additional experience of both the area of computing and the opportunity to experience a different learning environment.

In the non-traditional trades groups, the private provider pre-vocational group were aware that they could have taken up TAFE options. Reasons for choosing their current course included the fact that it was short and provided an opportunity to sample three non-traditional areas, it was designed for women, it was more supportive than TAFE, and it was cost free.

I heard an ad. on the community radio station here about this course so I rang up and ... it was because it was run by (training provider) ... which is specifically to do with women and it was a women's only course that encouraged me to do it. (Pre-vocational)

Getting started: Information, selection and enrolment

A range of information was gathered about the process of entering training, including finding out about the course, and successfully negotiating selection and enrolment processes, including RPL. Recruit-

ment strategies by training providers were also examined, with particular reference to women with multiple disadvantages.

Key findings and success factors

- ❖ A wide and varied range of information dissemination strategies is necessary to reach diverse groups of women.
- ❖ There appears to be an almost complete absence of affirmative action strategies for the identified multiple disadvantaged groups of women, and some indications that they may be further disadvantaged by new training arrangements, especially the loss of labour market programs as pathways into traineeships.
- ❖ School-based careers advisers continue to be important sources of information for young women, and reports of gender bias continue.
- ❖ Women need timely information provision, which includes material on delivery, costs, locations and times of training.
- ❖ Women need clear information and support for training pathways both into and beyond their current course, and this information needs to be built into new training arrangements.
- ❖ Successful selection processes should be as simple as possible and confine themselves to collecting directly relevant information.
- ❖ Use and acceptance of RPL was unexpectedly high, but it could be improved further by increased recognition of work and life experience in addition to qualifications, and by low cost and fast turn around times.

Information about the course

Dissemination strategies

Overall, having a variety of targeted dissemination strategies available for course information was reported as important for successful recruitment of women by both training providers and some participants. This required adequate resourcing and expertise on how to reach the target group. Sources of information were particularly important in emerging and non-traditional industries.

In community services, women in employment found out about their courses through employers or from brochures and newsletters sent to their place of employment. Newspapers, both suburban and metropolitan, were another common source of information. Women not in employment were most often likely to name the Commonwealth Employment Service¹ (CES), either as a general information source or through their case manager as a source of information. Some women, both employed and unemployed, had made their own inquiries directly to training providers or professional associations involved in training.

For students with a disability, specialist employment agencies were important sources of information. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups named word-of-mouth in their communities as the most important source of information.

¹ The Commonwealth Employment Service has been replaced by Job Network.

Among the IT and telecommunications groups, the telecommunications course had a photograph of a woman on the course flyer, while the IT courses had no specific information. Even with the photograph, women in the telecommunications course were still concerned that they might be the only woman in the group.

There were positive experiences of advice from school careers advisers from this group.

I wanted to do engineering ... and in the end I wanted to work for the telecommunications industry and my careers adviser knew that I did physics and that and she told me 'Oh engineering's the way to go' and then she saw it so she pushed me to go for it. (Telecommunications cadet)

However, some telecommunications participants also reported less than successful experiences. The employer for this group confirmed that promotional material, including a poster with pictures of women and diverse cultural groups, was sent to all schools in the State.

My careers adviser actually gave it to boys and a boy gave it to me ... that's the only reason I got it ...

... with us, our careers adviser left straight after my year and ... the year below me a girl ... wanted to do it desperately, but she never really got a chance because she looked through the newspapers all the time and the careers adviser, the new one, he didn't bother ... (Telecommunications cadets)

One non-traditional trades women-only course had used a wide variety of information dissemination strategies, which included metropolitan and suburban newspapers, community radio and a wide distribution of flyers. This was followed by an information session. Students in this group were impressed with the range of strategies used.

Some women in trades had been influenced by general campaigns on non-traditional choices for girls, such as Tradeswomen on the Move. The trades group emphasised that careers advisers could be, but often were not, important sources of information, and that sustained efforts were required to interest and inform women about non-traditional training.

The trades group also made some comments about the targetting of courses for women to enter non-traditional fields. Its past experience had been that the focus was often on girls who had left school early or on long-term unemployed women. It was pointed out that the trades groups might find the shift to full-time training of a technical nature, in a difficult environment, too much to cope with, and that these factors diminished interest and persistence with the courses.

Recruitment of specific subgroups

In mainstream courses, that is those not targetted at Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups or women with a disability, training providers reported little attempt to recruit specific subgroups of women not currently represented in their courses. TAFE providers and some private providers were keeping statistics on subgroup participation, and one had an annual

review process, but it was not clear what strategies, if any, were in place to improve participation.

Issues identified by providers included lack of resourcing to support specific groups, such as NESB women or women with disabilities, possible difficulties in placing women with traineeship employers and the loss of labour-market programs as an entry point. Some providers had not given thought to the recruitment of women from under-represented groups.

Quality of course information

Across all industry groups many participants were critical of the quality and quantity of information they were able to access prior to enrolment. In some cases information such as course dates, starting times and location(s) was not available until very shortly before enrolment. This made it difficult to inform employers and make arrangements for child care and transport.

All the information that we did get—they kept changing it (laughter). They'd give us information and we'd go by it and then they'd ring us back up or something and send us more stuff and it was all totally different than the final notice ...
(Health trainees)

Women who made their own inquiries of providers, either before or after hearing about the course, were much more satisfied about the information they received. The group of students with a disability also reported receiving helpful information and assistance.

The importance of pathways

All groups were asked whether and when they had received information about pathways from their courses into work and further training. Training providers made the point that applicants also needed information about pathways into courses, since they might not be able to immediately meet course requirements. Both students and training providers confirmed that information about pathways was very important, both as a motivating factor and one that enabled women to plan career moves.

Pathways into current training

Across all industry groups, a substantial minority of participants had been involved in other training, including labour market programs, before their present course. Some of this functioned as preparatory, for example, a short child-care assistant course which preceded a traineeship, or entering a TAFE diploma at Certificate 3 level. TAFE basic education was also mentioned as an important stepping stone to vocational training by some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents. Providers were concerned with the loss of 'first step' entry-level training, especially through labour market programs, and considered that many unemployed entrants to training could not immediately function at higher traineeship levels.

Case study: Pathways for long-term unemployed women

One group of women in community services, who had been long-term unemployed, were training as assistants in nursing homes, through an accredited labour market program with a private non-profit provider, in an urban area of high unemployment. The program was being replaced by a traineeship. The group was enthusiastic about their training.

The provider considered the client group disadvantaged in access to employment and training due to low levels of education, poverty and a high proportion of NESB women. She was highly focussed on employment outcomes and reported moving students within the course into work placements, where they would have the best chance of subsequent employment.

Members of this group identified themselves as 'nurses' and many voiced an aspiration to progress to enrolled nursing and registered nursing. Some had struggled with low levels of education or literacy, and had already done adult basic education courses or shorter vocational courses as first steps. They had been offered access to the traineeship and informed of people from previous courses who had progressed directly into nursing training, enabling them to develop trust that a career path was possible. This was highly significant for the group and provided an incentive for them to complete their training.

But they've given us an option where we put our names down the other day ... we put our names down for a traineeship.

Yeah, (name) said the other day that she was going straight from here ... (yes) going straight to university to do the RN.

(New work opportunities, aged care)

The question of pathways from access and specially targetted courses into mainstream VET or university was significant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and their training providers. One traineeship broker in this field explained that it was very difficult for people to trust that a traineeship would really lead to ongoing employment, as the community had been let down so often in the past. He thought that only as some successful trainees remained in employment would traineeships become attractive. Factors which would lead to this were a careful selection of the 'best' people for each position, structure and support in the training program, especially for the first three months, and pathways to higher-level training or apprenticeships.

Another innovative approach to bridging into a traineeship described by the same broker was to 'job share' a traineeship position between two part-time trainees, with each receiving literacy and numeracy support in their days away from the traineeship. An added advantage for the employer was that one trainee was always available.

In contrast, some senior members of the indigenous focus group and some TAFE provider staff were more doubtful of the value of a traineeship. One focus group member described it as, 'just a shop assistant'. There were concerns that support needed to be provided before the traineeship was taken up, with some kind of 'warmup' program to accustom the trainee to

full-time work and study. The provider was also concerned that students with the capacity for university study were not diverted into traineeships.

Pathways to further training

The question of pathways beyond the current course was recognised as important by all training providers. Points of concern included whether TAFE would accept articulation with traineeships with on-the-job delivery and assessment, and TAFE acceptance of private provider courses. Articulation with universities was well established for some child-care and information technology courses in TAFE, and two private providers in community services were also working on university articulation.

A further aspect of pathways that is important for women is having multiple entry and exit points for courses. This may involve, for example, being able to enter a Certificate 3 course and proceed to diploma level, or to enrol for a diploma but exit at Certificate 3 or 4. These features provide flexibility in entry criteria, and enable completion of a higher-level qualification to be broken into stages. This feature was confined to the TAFE diploma courses and was regarded by providers as important for women, who often break their training into discrete segments.

Most groups in community services had some information about further pathways from their course into TAFE or university, although one community services traineeship group in health had no further training pathways currently available. The pre-vocational non-traditional trades group had information about possible next steps and the training provider was working on obtaining apprenticeship places or other training for them. For the IT and telecommunications groups, there was less clarity about future pathways. One provider suggested that this was a feature of the industry, with its high level of change and lack of established occupational boundaries.

Pathways to employment

Some training providers, including TAFE providers, were providing pathways into employment. One example was a TAFE disability provider who was placing and then supporting students in employment using a 'train and fade' model with a high provider presence in the initial stages, which was gradually decreased until the student no longer required support. Another TAFE IT provider acted as a point of contact between students and potential employers. Other providers were acting in employer and brokerage roles for traineeships, a function discussed under 'Selection' below.

Selection

The literature on best practice in selection suggests that 'best practice' selection criteria are important in enhancing equity in access to training. They enable participants to enter courses on the basis of relevant criteria only, and do not indirectly discriminate against some applicants by setting criteria which they might not have had an opportunity to meet. It is important to set criteria in terms of what is necessary for entry-level

competency in an occupation, rather than what has been 'traditional' for the occupation in the past. This applies to both traditional feminised occupations and non-traditional occupations for women.

Three forms of selection were apparent across all industry groups. For traineeship, apprenticeship and 'cadet' groups selection was made by the employer. TAFE courses and some private providers had formal selection procedures designed to test some combination of aptitudes, knowledge and motivation. Other private and community providers, especially in community services, conducted interviews to determine level of motivation or relied on expressions of interest. An interesting point about selection is that not all 'selection' processes are used to select, in the sense that it is rare for anyone to be turned away in many courses, but some are used to provide advice on level of entry, or are held in reserve in case applicants exceed funded places.

Participants themselves had few comments on selection, seeming to regard the process they had gone through as a 'given' or as understandable for the course they were entering. They were thus rarely able to comment on what might constitute best practice. Providers were able to explain selection processes and their rationale but were not always informative on who they might be likely to exclude.

It was not possible to identify success factors in selection from the information provided in the study. Instead, a range of barriers to equitable selection were identified, principally by training providers. Some barriers could also be inferred by contrasting actual selection processes with suggested best practice. Barriers included the use of inappropriate or irrelevant criteria or criteria that could be indirectly discriminatory for women. Another barrier was the use by TAFE of lengthy and involved selection forms, which were not actually used to select applicants, and which probably discouraged the least confident, literate and patient sections of their applicant pool.

The finding reported earlier that few providers were attempting to recruit women who are multiple disadvantaged is also of relevance here. Even when such women do seek entry to courses, there is little evidence of additional support or affirmative action measures in selection processes, except for providers who explicitly identified themselves as targeting disadvantaged groups.

Employer selection

Since the importance of employer selection will be increased under new traineeship arrangements, it is of particular interest to this study. Some evidence was available on employer selection, based on employer interviews and comments from focus groups. Unfortunately, the small number of employers able to be interviewed has limited this data.

One feature of new training arrangements that may increase in importance is the increase in agencies that combine employer and training provider roles. One community services provider who was also an employer used a formal selection process that comprised a standard aptitude test (also used by TAFE providers in this State) and an interview. The provider reported

that students with low literacy skills tended to be excluded by the aptitude test. The student group as a whole saw the test as having 'nothing to do with' the occupation. The interview was considered fair by the group and probed interest in and knowledge of the work, responsibility and personal goals. Applicants were then re-interviewed by the employer in whose enterprise they were to be placed. The training provider reported that some were rejected at this point for factors such as low self-confidence and poor presentation.

A case could be made here that some criteria not relevant to success in the occupation appeared to be in use. It is not clear that the level of literacy required by the test was also required in employment, and whether requiring some knowledge of the industry might disadvantage some entrants. Self-confidence and presentation might also be questionable as selection factors.

Another selection issue which may increase in importance is the role of 'brokers' in traineeship placement whose task is to match potential trainees and employers. Members of the rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group who were in leadership positions raised the issue of whose responsibility it is to ensure that traineeship participants understand their contract. The activities of those recruiting potential trainees had been a cause of some concern, in terms of whether those enrolling really understood what the implications were.

... in regard to the traineeships ... the people who brought them into this thing of interviewing them and getting them ready and bringing them to the workplace, are all white people and they used a lot of language that these people who were getting into this contract of 12 months didn't understand ... what they were talking about ... and they didn't understand that 13 weeks if you don't turn up to work, 13 weeks you don't get no money ... you just have to find some other way of living and in these government offices you have Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander employed people to take these people through this ... so where are they when these Aboriginal people need help ...

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

The most rigorous selection process in any group was for the highest level course, an advanced diploma in telecommunications offered as a 'cadetship' by the employer, with TAFE as the training provider. It included a detailed written application that probed both motivation and technical knowledge, a test involving English, maths physics and graphical analysis, in which both speed and accuracy were important, and an interview. The interview probed attitudes and skills in teamwork and communication and also offered information about the cadetship.

The student group considered this process stringent but fair. They had noticed that there were not as many women as men at the group testing sessions, but a higher proportion of the women made it through to employment. This was confirmed by the employer, who reported that while women made up less than 15 per cent of those sitting the test, they averaged 30 per cent of successful applicants.

This employer was selecting at a high level, with attention both to aptitude for the technical training and workplace team skills. The major success

factors for women would seem to be undertaking a maths and science course at school. It was not possible to make a judgement on whether the technical requirements of selection were appropriate for the course.

TAFE selection

TAFE providers tended to be critical of their selection processes, describing them as cumbersome. A typical example involved applicants first needing to meet a set of entry criteria, which included either Year 12, other forms of tertiary achievement or success in a tertiary entrance test. They then had to complete a long selection form, which asked for verified evidence of relevant work and life experience, plus other information on goals, skills and attitudes.

The provider considered that the selection form was a barrier, particularly for applicants already employed in the industry, those with lower literacy skills and those who had busy lives. Furthermore, all applicants who met the entry criteria were usually able to be accommodated within the course in some way, some at a lower entry point. Students reported feeling intimidated by the process, despite receiving comprehensive prior information about it. Some had thought 'I can't do this'. Others had found it difficult to amass the necessary information, including references from prior employers or school achievement reports from years ago.

An example of potential indirect discrimination for women came from a TAFE IT course which reported awarding extra 'points' in the selection ranking for applicants already employed in the field, or supported by their employer through paid time off for study. The provider pointed out that an extra 'point' was also available for returning to work and study, a characteristic more applicable to women. Nevertheless the literature on participation in TAFE demonstrates that the first two criteria are much more likely to be met by men than women. This course was not currently using its rankings for selection, having been enabled through additional funding to accept all applicants who met the initial entry criteria, but anticipated that the rankings would need to be used in future if funding was not renewed.

One issue raised by providers in selection for emerging and non-traditional industries was the need to continue to encourage girls into maths at school because it remained such an important gateway subject. One IT provider was concerned that the emphasis on girls and maths might be slipping, and needed further reinforcement.

Selection by other providers

A number of providers in community services, and the provider for the pre-vocational trades course conducted selection interviews to determine interest in the course and to provide information and a 'reality check' about what it would involve. Courses in community services for employed women had no selection process as such. The other course without selection processes was the TAFE IT course for school students, although the provider noted that it was so popular that some selection might have to be introduced in future.

Enrolment and course counselling

Factors that might influence success deriving from enrolment and course counselling include the provision of advice and academic counselling as part of the enrolment process, especially where a course includes different specialisations or electives. RPL and credit transfer processes, which can speed course completion are also considered part of enrolment.

The few groups that needed to make choices about vocationally based electives were all dissatisfied with the process. Implications for success are that they may have not taken the best opportunities to inform themselves about vocational specialisations, or that they might have wasted time doing subjects they did not see as relevant.

The literature on RPL recognises its particular importance for women. There was a high level of awareness of RPL among the groups and some excellent examples of best practice. However, RPL for work and life skills was not being used by many courses and some providers were still not totally convinced of its validity.

Enrolment information

The actual enrolment process was reported as problem-free by most participants across all industries. Of the three groups that had vocationally related elective elements in their courses, none were happy with the advice they had received but none considered that this was particularly a problem for women.

The only group making major choices, in a TAFE diploma course, reported some inaccurate information about which subjects they needed to do, only to find out later that other options were available. The training provider reported that subject choice was flexible and extensive course counselling was available.

Two courses, a health traineeship and an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access course, had a series of short electives. The health trainees reported very little information about what these consisted of and a generally offhand attitude to selection by the training provider. They considered that more information would have been helpful, as the electives were a useful way of obtaining some information about areas of specialisation in their occupation.

We didn't get told any background on it or what you'd get out of this course and what you'd do to achieve it. All we got was our enrolment form and they said you need five of these eight, here pick them—you've got five minutes and everyone says 'Oh this sounds good' ... (laughing). (Health trainee)

For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, electives were perceived by some as potentially vocationally useful, but students chose electives with little guidance, often on the basis of cost. The training provider was committed to giving the group useful choices but was hampered by resource constraints and the need to meet minimum numbers for each elective.

Recognition of prior learning

The contribution of RPL to successful outcomes for women has a number of components. One is that women are concentrated in areas of the workforce where skill recognition and formal training are recent phenomena, thus recognition of workplace learning is particularly important for them. Women's interrupted patterns of workforce participation and involvement in home-based and voluntary community work require the recognition of life skills. Finally, women are much more likely than men to work in part-time and casual positions, and may need to work across different industries to remain employed. Thus skills acquired in occupations outside their current industry also require recognition.

Across all industry groups, all but two knew about RPL as a possibility and almost all had been able to access some form of RPL. This is a higher level of access to RPL than reported in previous studies, and may be a consequence of the stronger emphasis on RPL in community services (well represented in this study), a point noted by key stakeholders in the field. In IT, the strong emphasis on skill upgrading and the wide variety of short training courses may also have led to more use of RPL.

The most common forms of RPL were for prior qualifications or subjects. It was noteworthy that RPL practices varied widely among providers even in the same field of study, and that TAFE charges for RPL reported by providers also varied widely from State to State.

Providers were supportive of RPL but noted some difficulties in its full use. These were principally to do with its cost, both in terms of how RPL was funded and the costs in time and money to the provider of assessing experience by demonstration. Only one provider voiced anxieties about RPL for experience, in terms of whether it could adequately test 'the why of good practice'.

Case study: RPL

An interesting example of RPL came from the TAFE child-care provider, operating in flexible delivery mode. The provider encouraged maximum use of RPL and took a creative approach to kinds of evidence that could be presented. There seemed to be a link here to flexible assessment practices and the expertise gained in developing these, including the demonstration of competence 'at a distance' through videotape or validated personal statements. The provider noted the growing confidence in off-campus assessment, which had built up over time as methods were trialed and validated.

Students in this group said that they 'had heard nothing but RPL' and confirmed the very strong encouragement to use it, including discussions with staff about the possibility of RPL in their individual life and work histories. They had found the process easy and well explained, with instructions on how to self-assess against learning outcomes and possible kinds of evidence they could use for each. Cost was not a major issue as RPL was set at a flat fee of \$10 per module.

Best practice elements of this example involve the wide range of means of validation of current competencies, low cost, attention to life skills and strong staff support for the process.

Four groups overall, two in community services, one in IT and the pre-vocational trades group, had been offered RPL for relevant experience. A fifth provider identified RPL for experience as available, but the focus group did not seem to be aware of it. Processes used included:

- ❖ self-assessment of experience against competencies required, supported by references from current or past workplace contacts (Community management, private provider)
- ❖ assessment against outcomes for each module, with listed criteria for each outcome as potential evidence 'triggers' and a wide range of evidence types, for example, work plans, work reports, statements validated by employers, videos, texts of oral presentations, brochures developed (Child care, TAFE provider, flexible delivery)
- ❖ assessment of experience against learning outcomes in an interview and by viewing of work from past subjects where this was available (Trades pre-vocational)
- ❖ assessment of workplace experience and own individual learning by interview and demonstration to staff member with dedicated RPL responsibilities, and by validation from employers (IT, TAFE provider)

Some TAFE and private provider students were dissatisfied with long waits for outcomes of RPL assessment. Providers confirmed that the process could be lengthy, but noted that students had been told that this was so and advised to enrol first in subjects where they were not seeking RPL, and to allow sufficient time for processing.

There was interesting discussion in three of the community services groups of the reasons why some members had passed over the offer of RPL, feeling that 'you can always learn more'.

... like working in child care is completely different from what you're learning so because we hadn't done—even if we might have thought we knew what we're doing it's always good to know correctly—like the right way to deal with the basics ...
(Child-care trainee)

I feel like if I do the whole thing, I've done the whole thing ... like it's more in depth.
(TAFE child care)

This suggests that what is often interpreted as 'lack of confidence' among women in applying for RPL may in fact be a more complex phenomenon, involving the desire to improve competencies and client service, and a lifelong learning orientation.

Keeping going: Support, delivery and learning experiences

Participants were asked about facilitating factors and obstacles to their participation in training and about what had helped them to overcome obstacles. Some of the issues raised by these questions were important for both initial access and continuing participation in training. Both focus groups and providers were also asked about the level of drop out from their courses and why it had occurred.

Key findings and success factors

- ❖ Support and encouragement from training provider staff, other students, employers, work colleagues and family serve a number of functions, including reassurance of achievement and direction, reminders of goals and confirmation of the value of the learning for the individual and the enterprise.
- ❖ Low levels of income, in combination with transport, housing and child-care costs, and the costs of training itself, are a major obstacle to course participation, especially for adult women and women with family responsibilities who are in traineeships or receiving income support.
- ❖ Most groups had access to libraries and computers, literacy and numeracy assistance and academic and personal counselling, but few had time to use them.
- ❖ Students in private provider courses had reduced access to library and information literacy resources and professional academic and personal counselling, but the effects of this depended on the level of course and time available for use of resources.
- ❖ Delivery needs vary considerably, depending on work and family responsibilities, but the provision of part-time training courses, courses that are not accelerated in pace and opportunities to leave and rejoin courses, if necessary, would be success factors in delivery.
- ❖ Availability of child care was not an issue for most groups, but its cost, the location of child care in relation to training sites and access for early morning or evening classes were problems.
- ❖ Elements of off-the-job learning that made for success were the opportunity to share experiences and learning with other students and supportive staff, and perceptions of high-quality teaching, especially for non-traditional training groups.
- ❖ Elements of on-the-job learning that made for success were activities with immediate relevance and having some workplace learning support.
- ❖ For women in emerging and non-traditional areas, managing gender-related experiences with curriculum and with male training provider and employer staff, is part of the 'work' of keeping themselves in the course, and requires a high degree of determination, assertiveness and interpersonal skill, and a willingness to engage in personal reflection.
- ❖ Across all the groups there were suggestions that male training provider staff were better informed about issues of gender-related discrimination and harassment, but that some unacceptable behaviour from both staff and male students was still a problem.

Participants most frequently mentioned personal support as a factor in successful ongoing participation in training, and issues of wage levels and income support as a major obstacle. Other significant factors were their experiences with delivery and with learning, both off-the-job and in the workplace.

Responses in the focus groups provided rich qualitative data on women's perceptions of the training process. Because the emphasis was on success, women discussed and reflected on what was really important for them and on how they responded to and overcame obstacles.

Personal support and encouragement

Across all industry groups, a frequent response to the question 'What keeps you going?' was support from training provider, employer staff, other students and families was very important.

Support from training providers

Examples of training provider support included listening and feedback.

... and if you've got problems at home they've always got an ear to listen (yeah) to talk with you and support you in every way to get through it ...

I used to think I'm not going good at school ... and then they'll just show me how I'm going, you know ... (Child-care trainees)

TAFE IT students also reported 'fantastic' teacher support, including access to staff on a 24-hour basis by mobile phone and email, and designated student contact times. Their experience had been when they asked for assistance, the level of support was very high.

For the women in community employment returning to study, the need for training providers to offer support, structure and the reassurance that they are 'on-track' was important, especially for women in isolated jobs in small community organisations that were poorly resourced. Sharing experiences with other students and learning from and with them was another important motivation to keep going.

All but the schools group had encountered few female training provider staff. Across the study, participants reported that just having some women staff was a positive experience, and one group reported the extra time, after hours, they had been offered by a female staff member and their appreciation of this.

Employer support

Having fees paid by employers, course attendance in paid time or being able to take time off in lieu were all tangible and important sources of employer support.

Community, family and peer support

For indigenous groups, support was derived from being in specific courses for their community.

Well, like you get to know everybody basically and you ... relate more to your own people ... without having to say something, and knowing somebody is going to get offended by it, whereas when you are with your own people you're more happy ...

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

For rural women studying by flexible delivery, family support was a critical factor. Several gave examples of instances where partners or family

members had taken over their family responsibilities or encouraged them to continue at difficult times.

... and he said, 'You need this, it's going to benefit everyone, you're enjoying it. Do it!' (TAFE child care)

Conversely, lack of family support was cited as a significant reason for other women dropping out of the course.

In training that was non-traditional for women, the presence and support of other women students were important for several groups. Assistance and support from staff perceived as sympathetic to women were also important.

Well, I did the pre-apprentice year—12 months—which counted as 18 months of the apprenticeship and there was another woman with me all the way through that. I could never have got through that without her there ... that was fantastic ... yeah!

There were a couple of men in this institute who are wonderful for women but they are outnumbered about 10 to one. (Trades)

However, some women chose not to or felt it was too dangerous to be seen to be getting support from other women.

Even some women who are in trades now just don't want to know about groups like this because they just want to get on and do the job. They don't want to be noticed. (Trades)

Income and costs of training

The most frequently cited obstacle to participation across all industry groups was low levels of income for women who were not school leavers or first entrants to the workforce. For traineeship groups the traineeship wage itself was the problem, with some women already in employment taking a wage drop to undertake the traineeship. A particularly difficult combination of costs for trainees was transport and housing.

When asked how this problem was overcome, some women reported working at other jobs, for example, at weekends, to make ends meet. Some were also working for additional hours with their employer, outside the traineeship arrangements. This was stressful because of the time demands of training, employment associated with training and other additional employment. Women with children found this particularly difficult.

In one traineeship, group fees and textbook costs were supposed to be paid by employers but both students and the training provider reported that employers often refused to pay fees until after the course was completed, which meant they had to be found by students on very low incomes. Employers were at the same time receiving training subsidies for their students. Some students felt too intimidated to ask for fee reimbursement for fear of losing employment.

Training providers for traineeships reported that they were losing some students because of financial problems, especially those older than their early 20s and those who had dropped from full-time employment.

Some members of one trainee group were being paid over-award wages by their employers, who considered the traineeship wage inadequate.

Well, my boss just took one look at the traineeship wage and he just goes ... 'No way'!
(Health trainee)

In other groups, costs of training, including fees, were of concern to some participants and training providers, and providers reported losing some students who could no longer afford fees. TAFE providers had instalment payments in place, which were helpful, but the most successful TAFE strategy was payment of fees by module in one course, which both the provider and group said made a big difference.

Other private and community providers who were running subsidised pilot programs, or were unsure of subsidies continuing, did not know whether the courses would be viable with increased fees. For example, one community management course was set to quadruple its fees from \$250 to \$1000. A community services employer identified the current level of fees as a 'strain' on the organisation, especially where replacement funding for workers training in paid time also had to be found.

In groups receiving Abstudy or unemployment benefit, more general issues of poverty, poor health and difficulties with housing and transport, plus fees and course costs, were often barriers to participation, especially for the rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group.

We often encourage the ladies who come through our centre to come and do TAFE ... they don't want to come to TAFE because it will cost them too much money ... We have food vouchers in our centre—like outreach-type support—and we have a lot of students coming in there because they're paying their rent, they're paying their day care and they just can't afford to buy any food ... there's just no money left ... so ... I think that's ... I mean you just don't get enough money to go around now. The cost of living is too much ...

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

In this group, the loss of a TAFE/ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) bus service to outer suburbs meant that they could not often afford to attend all training sessions each week, as the private bus company charged four dollars for each one-way trip.

The provider for women with disabilities cited similar combinations of housing, health and family support as issues for women much more than men.

Low income and family responsibilities also intersected with problems of course delivery in a full-time course with early starting times and outer city TAFE locations. As one student put it, 'it takes time to live cheaply', especially for food when budgets do not allow the purchase of ready-prepared meals.

... your life is virtually on hold ... you've really got to be terribly organised ... I feel like its really based around young boys who don't have any responsibilities,

you know, and that's really difficult for us as women with lots and lots of responsibilities to fit around and into.

... when you are on a low income it's not a matter of just doing convenience shopping—like you shop in terms of what you can afford and that actually takes time to do that. (Pre-vocational)

For many participants, a part-time option would have been much easier, but they were aware, and disappointed, that only full-time training would attract funding.

Like my idea would have been three days per week over six months. Like that would have been really good for me. (Pre-vocational)

Access to support services

Support services have been an integral part of VET provision in TAFE providers and there has been a steady increase in the range and quality of such services. Some anxiety has been expressed about the capacity of private providers to match these levels of support and the impact this may have on VET outcomes for students.

Information about support services available to students, including child care, access to libraries and computers, literacy and numeracy assistance, and academic and personal counselling, and their use of these, was collected from each group.

General access and use of services

All groups with TAFE as their training provider or part provider reported access to all services was available with the exception of one TAFE institute, where a child-care centre was planned but not yet available. However, most of these groups reported that they were not told about services available at the beginning of the course, and it was some time before they were introduced to facilities.

I've been doing the course now for six months and it's ... and we got our talk two weeks ago, six months after you started the course, to let us know where this information was. (Health trainee)

Additional services had been provided by the TAFE flexible delivery provider to its students. This included setting up study groups by geographic location, each student being assigned to a lecturer for 'pastoral care', including at least one telephone call per month, and a newsletter for the group with both personal and course information. Students considered these services very important for retention in the course, especially the regular contact with lecturers.

One private and one community provider had arranged access to TAFE libraries for their groups. Both private providers had in-house libraries but one was very small. Another provider was making her personal library available to students for one module, while they had TAFE access for others. Non-TAFE students did not have access to computers. For academic counselling, some providers had employment placement staff and one had allocated all students to a placement counsellor for

employment support. In terms of personal counselling, students in some community service groups indicated that provider staff were also informally providing support.

When asked about their use of available facilities, both groups of traineeship students reported there was no time to use them, as they needed to return to their place of work, or the facilities were not in the same location as their training. Most said their course was 'practical' anyway, or they relied on course handouts and sometimes textbooks. Both the pre-vocational and school IT groups could use TAFE library services but also reported having no time to do so.

These data suggest that the structural arrangements for many programs, and in some cases the limitations of private provider facilities, are forcing women to rely on a narrow range of resources to support their learning. It is difficult to judge the importance of these support resources, especially to lower-level courses with a strong practical and workplace focus. However, their loss may ultimately reduce both the quality of learning outcomes and the ease of articulation into higher-level training. It may also mean that providers of higher-level training will need to offer support in broader forms of information literacy, which some students will not have received. Lack of access to computers is a particular concern in this regard. More research is required in this area.

Child care

Few of the groups interviewed, except the flexible delivery group, included women who were responsible for child care. Few students were using TAFE child care, and private provider students did not have access to child care through their providers. Women with children reported long driving times between child care and training and employment locations, and difficulties with early starting times and getting children to school. The trend for programs to contain off-the-job and on-the-job components at multiple locations makes child-care arrangements more difficult.

Well, I was in a position that my kids just [had] to cope ... I mean a lot of times their father's there but when he's not they have to do it themselves.

(New work opportunities, aged care)

The rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group reported more problems with child care, including not being able to afford child-care fees, as well as other costs, the TAFE centre being full and not having transport to get to other child-care centres.

Literacy and numeracy support

Some groups identified literacy and numeracy support as necessary for them. One group reported that NESB students in the group had struggled at first, but had received assistance from other students.

I remember at the very beginning something was mentioned that there are some people that have trouble so just have a bit of tolerance and ...

I'm one! I can't spell for ... I can't write properly so ... and I'm not proud of it but I get on and I'm using it ... (New work opportunities, aged care)

Course tutors were the most common source of assistance. The provider commented that wherever possible demonstrations and a 'hands on' approach were used to overcome literacy issues, that it was important not to make it 'too important' and that support from staff was available.

A similar process was reported by the Aboriginal child-care group.

Well, ... its been hard but we're getting there aren't we! Well I'm speaking for my own self not speaking for all of us (comments on 'all of us').

One of the problems is starting off ... putting it into words! ... we all help one another ... I mean no one's better than anyone else. (Aboriginal child care)

Delivery

Flexibility in delivery is considered an element in best practice for success in VET because it allows for the diverse interests of clients, including employers and people in training. Flexibility can take a number of forms, including off-campus delivery, time and location of delivery, entry and exit points, use of learning technologies and self-paced delivery. Flexibility in delivery is important for women because of their family responsibilities and their pattern of part-time work and interrupted career paths.

By these criteria, few of the courses included in this study offered much flexibility to their students, except some TAFE diploma courses that had flexibility of entry and exit points and modes of study, including off-campus modes. None of the courses were using computer-based learning technologies for delivery.

There was evidence of courses adapted for employer needs, or to fit funding criteria, but the effects of this 'flexibility' was to make their pace uncomfortably fast for participants, and to create complex schedules of attendance at multiple locations and fixed times, including early starts and late finishing times. These were less of an issue for younger women without family responsibilities or full-time work, but were obstacles for other groups.

Responses to questions about delivery reinforced the diversity of women's needs and the varied patterns that enable women with different combinations of work and family responsibilities to participate in training. One near-universal comment was that part-time training is an urgent need. What also comes through in the responses is that the more complex the delivery pattern within a course, the more obstacles created for women whose work and family lives are already more complex than those of men.

Appropriate forms of delivery

Few groups had a choice of delivery mode in their current course. Most groups were satisfied with their current form of delivery and said they would have preferred it to other options. The most important success factor in delivery was, not surprisingly, having a form of delivery that fitted the current needs of a particular group. What became clear was that different groups of women have very different delivery needs, and this

relates primarily to family responsibilities and the nature of women's employment.

Case study: Flexibility in delivery

The TAFE rural child-care group whose course was by flexible delivery had a different set of needs. Many of this group had children of preschool or school age and said the course enabled them to study while at home with them, then seek employment later. For this group, the course gave them a sense of identity and career direction.

I'm not just his wife, and that has been a big issue ... People say what do you do and I say I study ... I've got a lot of confidence out of it. (TAFE child care)

Others were working in rural child-care centres or in unrelated employment and the course was their only study option.

The group were very positive about the level of flexibility they had experienced. This included the ability to enrol and pay fees on a module-by-module basis, which enabled them to continually adjust their level of study to changing circumstances, such as their employment circumstances, pregnancy, illness or geographical moves. Other elements of flexibility related to the on-campus weeks, which were nominally twice a year but could be rearranged to suit students' needs, and the field placements, where again every effort was made to fit in with students' capacity to undertake them.

They really do work in with us. I have never had a 'No' over the phone to anything.

I would literally not be sitting on this chair now if they weren't so flexible. (TAFE child care)

Both students and the provider in the rural child-care course noted that one group who had difficulty with this delivery mode was school-leavers, and they tended to drop out more than other groups.

Metropolitan groups in areas of training where open and distance learning is available, were also asked whether they would consider this delivery mode as an alternative to their current course. Interestingly, all were strongly negative.

I think with the open learning where they go home with their homework and stuff, you don't have a teacher there to ask questions straight away when you have questions ... and you haven't got feedback from the other students, other experiences ... you're only home doing it all by yourself—you don't have the wider view from everyone else. (Child-care trainee)

In another example of diverse delivery needs, one community management group of women in employment were very enthusiastic about the times for their course, on a Saturday morning every second week. Evening training after a difficult day as the sole paid worker in a community centre was stressful and tiring and this was a much better alternative. However, they commented that they were all over 40 and none had responsibility for younger children. They suggested that other women had probably been excluded by the Saturday time. The second community management

group, which had more women with child-care responsibilities, also had occasional Saturday sessions and confirmed that these were a problem for women with children.

Part-time study options were welcomed by students in the TAFE diploma courses, where they were available. The absence of part-time training was identified as a problem in groups that had women with family responsibilities, and women returning to work and study. For example, members of three groups identified women, not present on the day of the study, who were struggling with combinations of full-time training and work, plus child care, which affected their ability to be present every day.

Night classes were a problem for students in one TAFE IT course, which had day classes that were in high demand and not always possible to access. Difficulties of night classes included not being able to get into the TAFE car park, which was full by 6pm, and having to park on the street in unsafe areas and walk back to cars after 10pm at night. Students thought this problem would not necessarily stop their participation in the course but might constrain their choice of subjects. Making child-care arrangements for night classes was also an issue.

For the schools group, a delivery issue that stopped the participation of some students was clashes with other school subjects, and with school exams.

On-the-job delivery components

Younger women in traineeships and cadetships enjoyed the substantial on-the-job component of their course and felt it gave them an edge over courses without this.

I think the more time you have to ... get you into the swing the better. Like the people that come out of TAFEs ... and they've been there like for two years and have no idea what it's like to actually work in what they've been learning about.
(Child-care trainee)

... it breaks up that being in class all the time ... you know! ... hands on ... you're learning better when you are out there!
(New work opportunities, aged care)

I think (block) is a more efficient way of doing it ... you get to see more of how the whole (workplace) ... works so when you're placed in one position you know how the other departments work ... you get to make contact and ... if you're only there for two days a week you wouldn't see everything, you wouldn't get the whole idea of what it's like to work there. (Telecommunications cadet)

The training provider for the Aboriginal child-care group reported having needed to experiment in order to find a work experience component that would meet the needs of both the group and child-care centres. Her solution was to make this component of the course non-compulsory, since some students had no previous experience of work and had some initial difficulties. Those students who took up the option were very successful. Although the work experience was not formally assessed, they received a letter from TAFE detailing their satisfactory performance and a reference

from the child-care centre involved. Two thirds of the previous year's course graduates had found employment in child-care centres.

Pace of delivery

Four of the groups, including both traineeships, the cadetship and the pre-vocational program, were undertaking courses at a faster pace than the comparable TAFE mainstream delivery. Three training providers reported some disagreement with employers over the balance of on- and off-the-job training time, with providers wanting longer off-the-job times and a slower pace of delivery. The pace of delivery was difficult for both traineeship groups, but especially for the group with only half a day per week for training.

... they rush too much (affirmation all round). They talk too fast ... you've got to put too much in. Like I mean how many hours is it—it's four to four-and-a-half—four hours in the morning and it's just not enough time.

(Health trainees)

The provider, who had been unable to negotiate a longer off-the-job period, identified the pressure this put students under as substantial.

Women who had been unemployed or had other family responsibilities also found the transition to a full-time program challenging.

I've been suffering a bit of high anxiety since I've been here ... because you can't get it all done ... you sometimes go out there you know and I sort of go pant pant pant—I've done a lot today!

(New work opportunities, aged care)

Re-entry to the course

All groups were asked what would happen if they had to leave the course before completion for some good reason, such as illness or a family crisis. Again because of family responsibilities women may need this possibility more than men.

Some groups pointed out that because their course was a 'one-off' arrangement they did not think any catch-up could be arranged. For the more established courses, students said they would have the opportunity to join another group. For trainees, this would be dependent on their remaining in employment.

Many students knew of others who had needed to drop out and return. Providers also commented that one of the major reasons for drop out from courses was the pressure of work, study and family combined. Health and housing problems were also significant causes of drop out for groups in poverty. If a greater proportion of training is funded on an ad hoc, non-continuing basis, the inability to leave and rejoin courses will have implications for women's capacity to complete them successfully.

Learning experiences off the job

The different approaches to pedagogy between community services and the information technology and trades groups could be seen in the emphasis in the former on shared discussion and the latter on perceptions

of quality of instruction. Thus 'quality' had different meanings for different groups. The need for cultural appropriateness is another element of 'quality', which was emphasised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants.

Discussions on the relationship between ongoing course participation and gender discrimination and harassment for non-traditional groups, illuminated a number of strategies used by male staff and students to draw attention to the presence of women as transgressive. These included constantly drawing attention to them, or its opposite, rendering them invisible, interpreting any non-compliant behaviour as aggressive and feminist or attempting to impose different and more 'ladylike' standards of behaviour on female students and, in some instances, sexualising their presence and sexual harassment. These patterns of behaviour were also reported in workplace settings.

Women's analyses of how they coped with or resisted these moves pointed to the 'work' of identifying the subject position they were being offered, working out how they saw their own identity in the situation and where they would 'draw the line', then managing both the situation and their own responses to it. This work is painful, tiring and intensely personal, and is particularly stressful where it has to be done repeatedly. Many women said they had nearly given up, through simply becoming 'battle weary'. Others had felt their sense of identity and integrity were under threat.

Shared experience

In community services, students' comments on their learning emphasised the importance and value of learning from each other through discussion and shared experience. This was greatly valued when it happened, and desired when it did not.

Well, I think that some of the classes we have here, like we can just sit down and we can just talk and discuss ... right ... instead of sitting there writing and I feel that we get a lot more learning out of just sitting down, just having a normal discussion ... like this ... (New work opportunities, aged care)

I would have liked to have had more opportunity to discuss some of our interesting things in our workplace so we can put together some ideas ... that's something I'd like to do. You know it has happened ... but there's so much squished in ... (Community management)

Strategies ... ways that you can handle things that you might have a problem with. If the teacher can't answer then one of the other girls may have different ways to do things. (Child-care trainee)

Not everyone in the whole class is the one age. You've got young people and you've got your older people and when you get to talking to them, especially in the welfare, you know you get all aspects of it ... you're getting information as well from everybody else. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

Other perceptions of quality of teaching

For the information technology and trades groups perceptions of the quality of teaching was the most often mentioned success factor. Individual and group support from teaching staff who displayed genuine interest in them was also important.

Some groups were appreciative of training provider staff who were seen as expert in their field, and had credibility through coming out into workplaces for discussions or supervision.

Perceptions of the standard of teaching had been an issue for some non-traditional groups. These included perceived incompetence, lack of interest or out-of-date knowledge, in teaching staff, and administrative factors such as many changes of teacher over a short period of time. The trade group made the point that it was often women students, who had chosen a non-traditional field and invested considerable energy in it, who complained and then became labelled as troublemakers, and that to demonstrate concern about the quality of teaching and learning was antithetical to male socialisation.

... we had four different changes of teachers ... we had one of the other teachers who taught us the year before come down and speak to us and say well what's the opinion ... and when the main man from the department [came] down the boys all clammed up and wouldn't say anything ... they would not say a word.
(Trades)

Some recognition of the effects of casualisation of TAFE training provider staff were made, in terms of rushed delivery, lack of teaching skills and less than 100 per cent effort from casual staff. Some community management students had prior experience of TAFE casual staff not being available for follow-up queries or assistance, and had chosen their community provider for that reason.

For the schools group, the learning environment in TAFE was a welcome change from school, with autonomy in learning identified as a factor in quality of teaching.

... you do your own work and like the teacher's not always on top of you ... You're much more on your own, the ladies that are teaching are more like your tutors than your teachers.
(IT school)

It is clear that students consider themselves able to make judgements about teaching quality and its effects on their learning outcomes, but that different groups had different perceptions of what was most important in this regard.

Learning formats and content

Students in general were positive about their learning experiences. They had appreciated workplace oriented project and practical work and, for some, choice of projects in fields of interest to them or in their employment setting. They also identified the benefits for their organisations of the practices they were learning to apply in the course.

Training providers were asked about the sources of curriculum, its alignment with competency standards and any customisation they had undertaken for particular groups, or for employers. Responses to these questions indicate that at this point most curriculum is not directly aligned to recent standards, although this was 'in the pipeline' for some community services and IT providers. Customisation to fit employer requirements, or to suit changed modes of delivery, was quite common and had not raised any major difficulties. Customisation for students tended to be informal and on a group-by-group basis.

In several groups, student discussion of content was strongly appreciative of its relevance and of support materials from training providers. In some cases, content had been negotiated to suit the needs and interests of the group, adapted for their situation, or in the case of the Aboriginal child-care students, for cultural inclusiveness.

There was very little negative comment on course content. One community management group wryly commented that some of their management theorists had clearly never worked in the community sector, and the material on time management had provoked much mirth.

Issues of culture

For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare groups there were issues about the teaching of indigenous cultural material, where 'textbook' knowledge conflicted with lived experience or traditional beliefs.

We were given a book in Cultural Studies ... teacher went and got it for us and in the front of it (it) said 'Traditional Life' and how Aboriginals came about and it said in the first part that Aboriginal people came from Asia and I said ... I just closed it and I said that's a heap of s__t basically ...

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

Issues of participation in mixed classes with white students were raised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare students. Opinions differed.

... It's not so much it's Aboriginal and Islanders—that's not why I'm here, I'm here to learn and it wouldn't worry me if it was a whole white class and I was the only black in there ... it doesn't matter if I don't fit in, I'm there to learn.

Sometimes I think when you've got the majority of white people in a class and there's a minority, they're really intimidated by that ... they don't want to speak up because they might sound silly or something like that so they'll hold back and ... I mean they won't be learning a lot of things ...

... well the white person always speak[s] over you ... if you try to explain something—they can explain it better!

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

This group suggested that small class sizes and teachers who were experienced with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were important ingredients for success.

Issues of gender

Gender issues in learning situations, both off the job and in the workplace, were perceived as much more salient for IT, telecommunications and trades groups than for community services. There was considerable discussion and some disagreement among trade groups about the current state of gender relations and whether it was improving. Most thought that overt harassment and discrimination by training provider staff had decreased, and this view was supported by training providers. Some resistance remained, however. Typical comments by IT providers were that women 'were not as well received' as men in the training context and that it was harder for women to earn the respect of older male staff.

One of the most interesting implications of the data on gender was the ways in which the gendering of occupations and training courses positioned women as workers or students. Women in non-traditional areas were aware of this issue and discussed, often with vigour, how to respond to the assumptions made about them and the ways in which they were treated. Trade groups in particular were aware that whatever they did, including taking no action, would have further consequences for the negotiation of gender in each setting.

What is important in this negotiation is that it constitutes 'work' for the women involved, part of their ongoing debate with themselves about participating in a setting in which their presence is transgressive. Being able to successfully resolve these contradictions, or safely express forms of resistance, is an ongoing process that is critical in their retention in the course.

In the IT, telecommunications and trades groups, several groups discussed their experiences with male TAFE staff and fellow students. In general these suggested that male staff were aware of gender issues and the need to behave appropriately and that in most instances this was what happened, but not without some awkwardness, which continued to flag that women were not the 'normal' clients for the courses.

I think that half the time there was a problem when we came that the teachers kept congratulating us, like 'It's so good to have you girls here' ... and you know the guys accept us, they know we're around and that, a new teacher comes in and goes 'Oh congratulation girls on getting in ...' and it was like, 'thanks but don't keep rubbing it in' ... (laughter). (Telecommunications cadets)

And it's been a learning experience for them (male TAFE staff). I think they're actually quite surprised in feeling reasonably comfortable, especially now that ... there seemed to be few fights at first ... there seemed to be this tension about ... if they did the wrong thing you know ... (Pre-vocational)

In one group there was discussion about 'where to draw the line' with male staff behaviour and also disagreement about how offensive the behaviour had actually been and about being courageous enough to speak out.

... Like there have been comments that I've let go that I've actually felt really disappointed in myself for having let go but I haven't felt really safe enough to say something ... (Pre-vocational)

Some instances of discriminatory or inappropriate behaviour were still reported. Women could be rendered invisible or subjected to intolerable attention.

He obviously doesn't like teaching females ... and he'd help everybody on the other side and he'd come round here and he'd get to one person from me, and he'd reverse back round. This went on for a couple of weeks and I desperately needed some help, and I'm not backward and I called him over and insisted he came and sat next to me, and it took about three times of doing that before he'd come and check that I was OK. (TAFE IT)

When I went through TAFE, we had teachers saying the worst things, picking on the females ... it's so bad having females in the class ... saying that they can't drive and just lots of derogatory comments. So these young blokes think it's hilarious and so these young blokes are getting the wrong idea from the start. (Trades)

Assumptions about how women should behave were also reported from trades and IT groups. This is another form of reminding women that they are 'different' from the normal course group and must adhere to different standards of behaviour. These included more policing of women's absences from class than men's, and of behaviours such as swearing, and, from the women-only group, a restrictive sense that working hard at their training was interpreted as reinforcing gender stereotypes that women were 'serious' and 'nice'. All of these episodes had met with some challenge from the women involved, even if it was not always openly expressed.

One thing that I found really hard in some ways is that ... we've been seen as this really good, nice, well-behaved (YES!) class (I agree—I absolutely agree) and I hate it—I absolutely hate it because it perpetuates this idea that women are nice and well behaved. In some ways I feel ... like that we should destroy that image.

Oh, and having to clean up other people's mess (oh yeah) because we're the women there and you know ... clean up or you're not leaving. Well I'm leaving now and I'm not cleaning it up (laughing). (Pre-vocational)

Another example of the complex negotiation of gender occurred in the trades group, who were trying to decide whether the TAFE trade environment was improving for women. Did young women actually have fewer problems with young men and, if so, was this only because younger women were more tolerant or naive? Here age, gender, age-related feminist attitudes and possible cohort effects of young men being exposed to gender equity messages at school were all being weighed as factors.

My experience actually with young fellas was that ... when I was in training ... I didn't have any trouble with the guys who were my age ... and we're talking 30 to 40 ... and then in my last year I went in a class with young men straight out of school and I thought they'd be OK—they've had all that gender equity shit at school and everything ... they were little b_____s! I could have decked every one of them.

I think the younger girls do quite well nowadays ... she used to talk on their level. She used to go in and talk about ...

... I think it's a lot of innocence isn't it?

Yeah ... well they ... she could talk about football with them ... and cars and beer ... I couldn't and I didn't want to ... I wasn't interested. (Trades)

Discussions among IT students provided two rich examples of how gendered characteristics are ascribed to fields that might be considered gender neutral or might once have been male preserves.

One group identified male students' perceptions of certain areas of the course and how these impacted upon both male and female students. Programming was seen as a 'macho' area, leading male students to choose it through peer pressure and some female students to avoid it because they saw it as 'too hard'. Systems analysis, which actually required higher levels of communication skills was seen as more 'wimpy' and was chosen by more women. This process is reminiscent of Eveline's (1995) findings on how areas of work were re-gendered to define some as 'women's work' when women were introduced to a mining site. The training provider was unaware of such stereotypes and said they made very little sense in terms of the requirements of the course.

In the second example, one TAFE IT student had a recurrent struggle with what participation in the course, and the employment field it implied, was doing to her image of herself. She had begun to feel that the only subject position the course was offering her was that of 'geek girl', an image she strongly rejected.

I went through a bit of stress a while ago about maybe I'm becoming a computer geek ... I've actually read a couple of articles in magazines, just here and there, which have popped up at just primely [sic] opportune times in my life whenever I have been questioning that during this course in the last year and a half. [There] have been articles on Net chicks versus geek girls you know, how you can be cool in IT, you just don't just have to be a geek girl. You don't have to get glasses and braids and like, do what all the boys do, you can like do your own thing, you know ... I came into this course thinking ... I'm coming from a really creative angle I've always been a creative person and I've done most of my studies in humanities-type areas. I'm good at working with people, so maybe I can offer something to the IT industry that a lot of people can't. I have that advantage, that I can bring the two together, hopefully. ... But I've found that I've had to question, and say now where's my individuality in this, where's that direction that I had when I came in at the beginning, where's the creativity, ... and I've had to fully like take subjects and claim them as my own, sort of thing, in order to want to do them. (TAFE IT)

This student said she might have left the course but for the effort she made to include her own creativity and people skills, core elements in her sense of herself, which she felt the course kept forcing away from her.

Gender issues for the groups in community services were external to the training setting itself, and were reflected in the status and remuneration of their occupations. Some awareness of this can be seen in the traineeship groups, who felt that their occupation, post-traineeship, would not be attractive to men because of its low pay and because it was seen as 'caring', or as 'women's work so-called'. The older community management group

were able to identify skills, which it was assumed they had prior to beginning the course.

I think there are certainly assumptions that we've a sensitivity, if you like, with the people we work with, and respect, and they don't really push that. It's in there—in the stuff we go through but they haven't spent large amounts of time on it because they think we needn't work on it—I suppose that is an assumption. (Community management)

Workplace learning experiences

Nine groups had some workplace learning components in their courses, six in community services, some of the group of women with disabilities, one in telecommunications and one in trades. They were asked how these were organised and what their experiences had been. Workplace assessment is discussed separately below.

The most important success factor for workplace training was mentoring and support from the training provider and from workplace staff. Time and encouragement to undertake 'training' activities were also important. One group reported tensions with workplace staff who perceived them as potential competitors for insecure employment, and another reported very high rates of sacking, which made it difficult to complete their traineeship. Patterns of gender discrimination were similar to those reported above for training settings. There was little evidence of training that addressed these.

Supervision and support from training providers

In community services most groups were visited on the job by training provider representatives. The most closely supervised were the aged care nursing group, whose training provider went into the workplace with them for work experience. This was one of the few groups in which instruction was carried out in the workplace. Other groups had been visited for discussion and supervision. This might involve going over planned activities together, informal observation and feedback, sometimes involving employer staff as well. One provider commented that it was important not to approach employers with 'TAFE jargon' and that materials to support supervision were better developed in the workplace.

Supervision of field placements was seen as important by the training providers involved, to support students and to monitor the quality of learning experiences they were receiving. One TAFE provider employed 'field placement' staff for both supervision and assessment in locations which their own staff could not service.

Two private providers, one acting also as employer for trainees, had withdrawn students or trainees from workplaces which they did not consider satisfactory. The traineeship provider explained that her workplace visits were unfunded by the traineeship but that they were considered so important that the provider was paying for them. She also made the point that other providers in the field were unable to offer this service for cost reasons.

The health trainees' group was not visited at all by their training provider, who explained that no funding was available for this, and that it would be difficult to visit so many small workplaces. The group reported that they were simply 'thrown in' to the work setting and had to learn as they went along. Many had problems in knowing who to ask for information and support.

If I ever asked (employer) a question ... 'Don't ask me questions!', he'd hate it, he just says, 'Just do it', but I said, 'But what if I do it wrong?' and he goes, 'Oh, then do it like that, just wait until you do it wrong and then we'll fix it'. But I said, 'Well I wasn't brought up like that'. But I could not ask him questions ... what if it's something really really major, you know, I stuff something up and then I've got to live with that, I'd rather ask the questions, know what I'm doing and then do it right. (Health trainees)

Relationships with employers and workplace colleagues

Overall, attitudes of employers and workplace colleagues to students or trainees were reported as highly variable, even within groups.

It just depends on the individual you are working with. I mean, I had some great tradesmen to work with who were helpful and didn't mind sort of walking me through it to start with and then I had the type that said, 'Oh you work on this and I'll come back in half an hour and see how you are doing' and it's just ... completely different ... (Trades)

The telecommunications cadet group had generally positive experiences of on-the-job learning, with mentoring and support from workplace supervisors. This was a high status group and the employer indicated that they were regarded as investments by the enterprise.

Finding or being given time at work to undertake the on-the-job components of training was a problem for many groups.

But they say too, you know, the employers, 'Oh you know you should go out and do this and get this', but never give you the time or ... you apply for the time and there's a crisis every day. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

An example of the issues that can arise in work setting, characterised by high levels of casual employment and recent introduction of training, occurred in the aged care nursing group. Some of this group had experienced resentment and unfriendliness from other staff. They believed that existing 'untrained' staff might feel threatened by those in work experience and traineeships, who could be seen as rivals for their jobs.

Yeah, they resented us ... yeah, they were scared we were going to take their jobs or something.

Oh you get a couple of friendly ones as I said but ... you know ... the majority ... they were feeling ... threatened, you know ..., 'Oh here they come to take over'. (New work opportunities, aged care)

Issues of gender in the workplace

Gender issues were reported principally by the IT, telecommunications and trades groups, but also by some community service students working with male employers or colleagues. They included both sexual harassment and more general instances of gender-based discrimination. These findings are not surprising and have been reported many times in the literature. What was interesting were the ways in which women sought and sometimes found successful coping strategies that enabled them to continue with their training. One student in a work team, where the clerical staff member was away, had cause to be assertive.

... so like, 'Would you be able to help out?', I mean, it could happen to a guy as well, I'm not really sure, but I just felt like, you know, you were treated a lot like an assistant ... 'Fax this please ... photocopy that and file that, please', ... I wanted to do some of the technical stuff ... Yeah, I went to the boss and I said, 'Oh, I really need some experience out in the field because I have to write up this report' and he took me out ... (Telecommunications cadet)

Another found it necessary to challenge assumptions made about her role.

I got to go up to (the city) and drive back down with this one guy, to do some work in regional towns, and the people that we met in regional towns just assumed straight away that I was either his secretary or his, you know, offsider, so they were very shocked when I actually said something technical because they sort of assumed straight away ... (Telecommunications cadet)

In the trades group, some students had not found ways to resolve these issues.

I was working with the main carpenter doing form work—everything was going fine, I was there for a week. Two other guys turned up from my apprenticeship scheme—I got put on the broom and that happens all the time. I've been asked to go back for three days because I'm good at vacuuming. It's like, thanks—I'm good at other things too you know!

That assumption too that because a bloke is a bloke he will be stronger, faster, smarter about the job, so you kind of miss out because of the stereotyping. (Trades)

Groups had a number of strategies for dealing with or minimising harassment. One group discussed the importance of understanding the prevailing workplace culture in building and construction, in which older male workers were described as having problems with literacy and social skills, and where bullying was part of the culture.

A lot of men in our industry are hardly even used to women, because for one they drink with the fellers, they go home and they actually live with the blokes that they actually work with, they've got a whole different life ... they don't even know women ... no they don't—they don't know how to relate to you and stuff, and you just get used to them and say, 'Oh well, that's your way!' (Trades)

Strategies in this group emphasised trying to stay 'on side' with some men and developing a very high degree of tolerance for unacceptable behaviour.

You can't go on a site where there's 300 men say, and kick up a big stink towards them because they will ... all of them will gang up on you and you've only got one ... If they come up and they've got really disgusting, then you say something. But the guys then, actually if they like you, they stick up for you and they'll put that person out anyway so you don't need to use all you own ... you can use the blokes to help you. (Trades)

Personal coping strategies that had been important included developing determination and pride in one's own achievements.

I think another thing that keeps you going is your sense of pride and accomplishment in yourself and it's really neat. ... I end up doing industrial jobs. I go into a lot of buildings and some of the buildings are big office buildings and ... you stand there in your uniform and with your steel caps and your tool bag and people say ... how nice it is to see a woman doing these things—men and women in the offices ... that is another thing that keeps you going—that and a sense of humour.

I stuck with it because I had started it ... like you've said, 'Look, I'm a woman in this male dominated area I'm going to finish the bloody thing ... show them ... it'll kill me but I'll finish it. I also had children and the last thing you want to do is to show them that you don't finish something that you've started. (Trades)

Only a small number of students in the non-traditional groups had received training on sexual harassment and what to do about it. While sexual harassment should be covered in workplace training, one incident of sexual harassment reported, where young women were assigned to work closely with older male workers, sometimes in isolated locations, suggests that organisations also need to review their work practices as women enter occupations for the first time.

There was one reported instance of action by an employer to address gender issues. After some problems experienced by women in the initial intake, a section of the group's professional development program on 'company culture' had been added on equal opportunity and the avoidance of discrimination based on gender and race/ethnicity. Women had been told that support was available and that unacceptable behaviour would not be tolerated. The employer reported that there appeared to be a positive climate for female cadets and very few problems in later groups.

Retention of employment

An obstacle to successful completion reported by one group of health trainees with small business employers was the difficulty of staying in employment with one employer long enough to complete the traineeship.

... like six months the government subsidy was for ... and seven months later I got sacked! He wasn't getting any more money. He could have waited until September ... like what ... another few months, and he would have got the last bit of the subsidy but that wasn't good enough. The government subsidy stopped and he can't afford me and he finally said ... (Health trainee)

Several group members had lost employment and managed to find another employer to take them on, sometimes with the assistance of the training

provider. The provider confirmed the high rates of employment termination in the occupation, and indicated that wherever possible students were kept in the course. She was very aware that the traineeship was a 'one-off' chance and the only point of entry to the occupation. However, unless a student found employment within a very short time they had to leave the course.

Getting through: Assessment experiences

Groups were asked about the kinds of assessment they had experienced in their courses, in both off-the-job and on-the-job contexts, and their comments about its usefulness and contribution to learning. Groups without direct experience of workplace assessment were also asked whether they had any comments or concerns about it.

Providers were also asked about forms of assessment and their comments on workplace and employer assessment were also sought. Providers identified assessment as competency based, but this took a variety of forms. One provider was grading assessment as this was seen as important for university articulation.

Groups had experienced a wide variety of forms of assessment. All groups had some assessment off the job. All except the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare group had some form of workplace activity to perform as part of their assessment, but not all were formally assessed in the workplace.

Overall, there was less actual workplace assessment, even in groups with considerable workplace training components to their courses, than expected, and also less employer involvement. This has limited the findings on gender issues in workplace assessment. Groups without experience of workplace assessment found it quite difficult to imagine.

Key findings and success factors

- ❖ Most successful and useful forms of off-the-job assessment were workplace related projects or practical assignments.
- ❖ Least successful and useful off-the-job assessments were tests, especially where they were the dominant form of assessment.
- ❖ Traineeship and apprenticeship groups had most on-the-job assessment, with some form of observation against a checklist of tasks a common form, but workplace assessment was relatively infrequent.
- ❖ Success factors in workplace assessment included clarity about the assessment task, prior rehearsal and coaching, student control of what is assessed and when, having met the assessor prior to assessment taking place, knowing it is possible to be retested and confidence in the assessor as fair, unbiased and ethical.
- ❖ Reports of assessment experiences ranged from careful, fair and enjoyable to extremely disappointing, with better experiences reported from groups in community services.
- ❖ Assessment by training providers was described as much more satisfactory than assessment by employers.

- ❖ There were some instances of assessment of women in the workplace that were not taken seriously by employers.
- ❖ Success factors in employer assessment that could be inferred from provider and student discussions, included high levels of training provider liaison, support and monitoring, management support for workplace assessors, and the provision of workplace settings that were suitable for assessment in terms of safety and client rights.

Assessment experiences off the job

Forms of assessment

In community services a common form of assessment for employed or trainee groups was 'homework' tasks to complete between weekly off-the-job training sessions. In some groups, presentations and contribution to discussion were also assessed. For one group, in which the training provider had indicated that literacy in written work was often an issue, contribution to classroom discussion was the only form of off-the-job assessment. One group was using peer assessment of classroom contribution and in-class completion of workbook segments, which were then checked by training provider staff.

Providers for these groups were strongly focussed on competency-based assessment and had made efforts to get away from traditional assessment forms. One commented that an effort was also being made to move to more on-the-job assessment.

These students commented favourably on the form of assessment to which they had been exposed, especially the discussion component. Two groups commented that many students were behind with their 'homework', and that it was not policed very tightly.

Similar forms of assessment were also in use for the TAFE child care flexible delivery group. The provider considered that her team had built up considerable expertise in assessment off-campus, and that the number of assessment items that had to be completed in the on-campus times was steadily shrinking.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group had concerns over the appropriateness of its assessment in some areas of the course, and suggested a more creative approach.

... you get taught the literacy and numeracy and sometimes people go there to like upgrade their literacy but in the cultural studies you are expected to write assignments ... so how can you write assignments when you're learning to read and write?

he (lecturer) then found out that it was much easier for the students if they had options on how to do it.

It's about five years ago that the Gulf people were doing theirs by video ... their assignments either by video or project, taking pictures and you know ...

(Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access and welfare)

Another common form of assessment for information technology and telecommunications and trades groups was one or more tests or exams at the end of each module, combined with some essays, project work or practical assignments. The round of tests could become overwhelming.

... sometimes we're tested two times a day, like a two period test and then we'll have a couple of practical tests all on the same day ... when you're finishing off all the modules you have like tests for a whole week ... the rest of your life sort of stops completely ...

... a lot of it's parrot learning ... I think you probably learn more from doing it on the job anyway ... but you need to have the background knowledge to be able to work efficiently, I guess, and learn more. (Telecommunications cadets)

The tests which this group experienced were principally calculations. They would have preferred more varied assessment with more projects and assignments. The employer for this group also indicated that a more varied range of assessment types was being negotiated with the training provider, as well as delivery of some modules and their assessment in the workplace. Issues of time and resourcing were limiting factors for employer involvement.

Some groups also found reliance on multiple choice testing less useful in aiding learning and were doubtful of its value.

... she was saying that all through her three years of training it was a multiple choice question-type assessment and she felt that that was quite inadequate and that it didn't allow a sufficient understanding of the knowledge that you had gained over that period of time, and she thought that it was like a copping out type assessment on the teacher's part ... and she also made the point that it didn't allow retention of that knowledge either. (Trades)

One group had difficulty in knowing what to expect in their assessment and were somewhat surprised by its content. However, the competency-based training (CBT) format, which allowed retesting, was appreciated.

I think they could have been clearer about what was actually going to be in the exam ... a week before the exam nobody ... seemed to know, did they ...

I found the two exams just so pedantic. I just didn't expect that from a TAFE college (laughing) like more prac. and more 'as long as you understand' ...

But they are prepared to let us do them and keep doing them, even in our own time, to pass. (Pre-vocational)

Another group were critical of what they saw as low standards in competency-based practical testing.

... but I've seen people being ... guys being talked through the whole project. Like say we had to do a set of stairs and the guys will go, 'Oh how do you do this?' or whatever, and another teacher comes in, 'How do you do this?' and the teacher ends up doing the whole project. (Trades)

One IT group reported that assessment was varied and clearly focussed on future workplace needs. However the strong emphasis on teamwork created some difficulties with uneven effort among the group. There was a clear expectation by training provider staff that groups were, as in the

workplace, responsible for solving difficulties among themselves wherever possible. However, unlike the workplace, some students did not attend scheduled group meetings, or handed in their component at the last minute. Younger male students were, the group suggested, less likely to take the task seriously and one female student, who had assumed a leadership role, had been nicknamed 'Madam Lash' by her group.

Assessment failure

Only one group expressed any major anxiety about failing assessment. This group was contracted to their employer, and a condition of contract renewal was a satisfactory ongoing record in their TAFE assessment. They were thus both more apprehensive about module outcomes, and more sensitive to issues that might impact on these outcomes, such as late delivery of texts or inappropriately high levels of difficulty, than other groups.

There was an instance last year where half the class failed one module and that was because it was a pretty hard module ... we didn't have enough practice for the test-like questions ... we still are redoing it.

We get like one chance if we fail, we get to do it again, if we fail that again or fail another subject then we're meant to be out ... and they've also said that we have to get a B grade average ...

... but they've sort of come down on us this year and said, 'If you fail ... we have to go into (employer) and they have to figure out why we've failed and if there's just no excuse ... which is not really very fair because our boss seems to think there's no reason we should be failing, but we still ... we haven't got tested for some modules, which makes it harder.

(Telecommunications cadets)

In this group, the employer had also requested that TAFE, as part of its partnership arrangement with the employer, accelerate the course so that these students were covering the work in a much shorter time frame than would normally be the case.

Workplace assessment

Observation by an assessor in the workplace was a common form of assessment, with some form of log book of assessment tasks as a guide. For three groups, assessment was done by training providers visiting the workplace, while in two it was done by the employer. Workplace assessment was generally seen as a positive feature of courses.

I think you understand the work more if you go and experience the work. You understand it much more ... it's a lot better to experience at work rather than just sitting down—answering questions. You think more! (Disabilities)

Provider assessment

Case study: Provider assessment in the workplace

One example of a very successful workplace assessment occurred in a community services traineeship group. The group reported efforts by the training provider to set them at ease before assessment and to give them some choice and feeling of control:

Four times in a year and then we have a meeting with them afterwards. You choose 20 topics ...

... they just talk to us heaps about it and say don't worry about it ...

It's what you feel like doing so they don't go through the ones that you haven't even concentrated on. They go through the ones you're happy about.

(Child-care trainees)

For this group the workplace supervisors were also involved, and had undertaken assessor training:

My (workplace) supervisor went through the book with me. Like I chose 20 [topics] at home and then they get their own book as well and she chose 20 that she thought I was doing really good [at] ... and the ones that I wasn't she put little marks there saying what I needed to do so I could pass. So we went through it together ... and she was really supportive.

(Child-care trainee)

Several of the group said they had actually enjoyed the workplace assessment process. They reported it as fair and considered that the training provider took some care to maintain standards.

Another group reported a similar supportive approach, with repeated trial runs, feedback and coaching from the provider. The actual assessment was done at the student's request, when she felt ready.

... they try not to let you fail, you know. Like you are either competent or incompetent, and in the end you do it properly.

(New work opportunities, aged care)

Both of these groups suggested that it was helpful if they had met the assessor beforehand, and knew what to expect.

You'd feel more comfortable. It wouldn't be like ... there's a stranger here watching me ... watching my every move. If you know the person you feel more relaxed and be able to sit there and go ahead with what you are doing more comfortably.

(Child-care trainee)

Employer assessment

Providers involved in workplace assessment indicated a high level of working with employers to attempt to involve them in the assessment process, but with mixed success. Some providers had worked with workplace assessors, provided training and support, and were now monitoring what was a generally satisfactory level of performance. A traineeship broker worked with the assessor and student three or four times in a work setting, and then 'handed over' to the assessor. One provider had developed a video and handbook to train assessors for its students. Another had developed a training package on assessment of students with disabilities.

Reported difficulties included employers who did not see it as their role to undertake assessment and were reluctant to take part in assessor training, despite its being made available. Community services employers, often in small business or community settings, were reported as particularly likely to feel this way. Providers suggested that employers had been used for TAFE assessment and there was a need to 'sell' assessment to management as a legitimate workplace activity. One also reported that assessors at present were often not confident enough. She had tried to set up a network for workplace assessors but found that 'nobody came'.

Groups with employer assessment reported some difficulties in getting it completed or taken seriously.

... they don't even read through it ... they ask you ... they say 'Can you do this? Can you do this?' ... My boss said, 'Here you are, you fill them out' and I'm going, 'Are you impressed with me?' 'She's excellent' (laughter).

They usually just tick it off ... 'Can you ...' (a lot of overchat mimicking the employer). (Health trainees)

The trades group perceived workplace supervision and assessment as an important part of their courses, and this was seen as essential to develop skills and attain certification. Some had been very let down by employer practices, which they saw as compromising their attainment of necessary skills. One had even approached her state training authority (STA).

I finished tech. last year and I'm sort of in my last 12 months of my apprenticeship and I've done servicing the whole of my apprenticeship, which is just oil changes, and I get given a big job and it takes me a long time because I've never done it before and the boss says to the foreman, 'Right, I don't want her touching anything big', so he just wants me straight servicing ... I know but the problem with the competency-based system is, and I went and saw (STA) at the end of last year because I thought I'm going to be doing this apprenticeship for ever, I'm only ever going to be able to do oil changes in my whole life (laughter) so I went and saw the lady there, she said, 'Fine, I'll go out and talk to your boss but I won't say that you've been here, and find out what's happening'. So she comes out and the next thing, 'Where are your blue books?', and everything's signed off so apparently I'm competent in every kind of mechanical skill, whereas I probably should have had only about five things signed off out of the whole book and the books have been shoved away now to collect dust and we're in limbo. I don't know when I'm finishing my apprenticeship. I'm 26 and as I said I'm earning \$200 a week and I'm pretty fed up with it but I'm not learning anything.

... there's no monitoring ... no policing ... no checks and balances.

... and if they had come out and put pressure on my boss he would be taking more of an interest in making sure that we'd done it. If they went out and said to him, 'Look we're not happy with the stage that (Name)'s at ... she should by now know how to do this ... (Trades)

For trades students placed with group training schemes, pressures to get successful outcomes were seen as adding to these problems.

I worry that people are going to get ... you know ... pushed through when they're not ready because the training schemes want to get people off their books

so they can say, 'We've got five people out—aren't we good' and they wave their flags and have all these glossy pamphlets and everything but they've got no product, they're not quality apprentices. (Trades)

For the telecommunications cadet group workplace placement reports were not part of their formal TAFE assessment but were recorded by the employer. The report was supposed to be discussed with the trainee but this did not always happen. The appraisal process was considered useful feedback, especially if it was discussed.

You have an appraisal, with questions on how efficient you were and were you good ... and that basically gets sent to our boss, the only feedback we get ... we had to write a report too ...

I always make sure I discuss the appraisal in my last week, trying to grab someone to make them sit down and ...

You just leave it on someone's desk and they'll keep forgetting and putting it off and especially if you've gone ... (Telecommunications cadets)

For another group, finding someone to act as 'supervisor' or provide feedback on skills, in small community organisations, where roles are blurred or where many 'staff' are volunteers, generated some problems. This group would have preferred assessment by the training provider.

I don't mind the supervisor signing off but ... I haven't asked anyone yet but I'm going to have to be very careful about who I choose among the volunteers because there's a real difficulty at our workplace at the moment ... with things happening up the ladder in the ... volunteers are going through a great period of change ... it would be a bit delicate ...

I don't really sense about ... how our management committee would necessarily know what we are doing ... I mean, to go out and ask for an assessment of what you're doing. I just think there could be a lot of pitfalls in it. (Community management)

Additional comments on workplace assessment

When groups were asked about their reactions to being assessed by an employer representative in the workplace, positive reactions centred around the relevance and immediacy of the workplace setting. Comments also included the similarity to RPL processes and the possibility of building best practice from what is already known about RPL.

The telecommunications group also noted that an employer might have more experienced and knowledgeable staff, and more up-to-date equipment than a training provider. However, a higher level of tutoring and small group work in the workplace would be required to assist students with the use of facilities and equipment.

Some of the community management groups had some experience of being a workplace assessor, or arranging workplace assessment, for students placed with them for work experience, from both TAFE and university programs. They commented on the difficulties that community workplaces created for workplace assessment, in terms of issues of client and volunteer confidentiality, which could be compromised by the documentation

requirements of the assessment, and the complex and multi-tasked nature of the work, which could make it difficult to assess. Those who had acted as assessors expressed dismay at what they considered to be vague and inappropriate assessment criteria.

... it made me realise that in terms of this process of competency and assessment that if the questions aren't right you can't actually assess the person ... to the level that they deserve to be assessed because you are being squeezed into this question ...
(Community management)

In community services, the question of standards was also raised in terms of possible conflicts of interest between a worker and an employer representative about what constituted good practice in workplaces, where funding pressures or profit requirements could conflict with workers' views of what constituted good care. Community settings, small businesses, commercial child-care providers and aged-care institutions were cited as examples of workplaces where these conflicts can and do occur. Lack of trust in an assessor could occur, not due to lack of technical assessment competence, but perceived lack of commitment to ethical and professional standards of care. There was considerably more confidence expressed in training providers as fair and unbiased assessors.

... I feel my boss is a ... person that's trying to make a profit out of child care ... she's just ... looking for money.

She's in it for the money!

Yeah and ... she hasn't got much consideration for us. She doesn't care about her staff ... she insults us and ... she can be very hard ...

(Child-care trainees)

In our situation we would find it really hard to approach a supervisor to do an assessment in the work area . I'm just thinking of our nursing homes and hospices where people are in aged care ... I would find it very hard to approach any assessors. I mean, it's lack of confidence or it could be a lack of trust in what they are doing ...
(Community management)

Questions of bias in the assessment of women were also raised.

I suppose with the glass ceiling too that's ... you know ... if women have to approach men who are high up and it depends on the man, I think ... that might cause a problem ...
(Community management)

The trades group also identified the potential for gender issues in workplace assessment.

There is a power play based on gender and the biggest issue is based on supervisor/subordinate relationships. It just depends on the process used because you can get worst-case scenarios and you can get some places where it works really well.
(Trades)

3 Policy implications

What women in this study wanted

The benefit of a qualitative study is that it allows participants to speak directly and at length on what is really important to them. What was really important to the women in the study?

First, women wanted training that will get them into employment and allow them to participate in careers and jobs that deliver quality outcomes and that are adequately rewarded with respect and income. Women in this study were participating in training to improve their chances of employment, to upgrade current qualifications and levels of expertise in order to retain employment and meet personal and social goals, as part of long-term career plans, which might involve making up for earlier educational disadvantage, to change careers or to start small businesses. Some women were preparing for their long-term re-entry into the workforce. Women's goals recognised both the 'education' and 'training' aspects of VET and often reflected a lifelong learning focus.

Second, adult women and members of multiple disadvantaged groups wanted training arrangements that acknowledge them as legitimate clients of the training system, whose needs must be considered as equal to those of the advantaged groups in terms of VET access. This means a system that treats women, in all their diversity, as central, not as add-ons. This means ceasing to design training arrangements for young men and then making unsatisfactory running repairs to the system to accommodate women and other equity groups.

Third, this study does not provide evidence of one employer-driven 'training market' for VET, with very few women in the study 'driven' or even supported by employers. As Golding and Volkoff (1997) have identified in their longitudinal study of equity client groups in VET, 'patterns of participation of clients across VET providers do not simply exhibit the characteristics of user choice in an open market' (1997, p.14).

Broad policy implications

In the conclusion to Chapter 1 of this study, it was argued that the VET system could be likened to the metaphor of a kaleidoscope, whose rotations result in new configurations of the same elements because the underlying assumptions do not change. New structures produce new versions of the same problems, and frequent structural change means that

equity initiatives tied to existing structures are outdated by each new shift. This is seen as requiring yet more research at an early investigative level, and it is difficult to progress to policy initiatives that confidently recommend structural change.

Thus, from this study it is possible to identify how some of the most recent elements of the VET system, including a stronger industry focus, user choice and flexibility in delivery arrangements, may enhance and obstruct women in their access, participation and outcomes. This material is presented below. But we need to recognise that in the long term what is really required is a much more fundamental change, outside the kaleidoscope, to introduce new elements that acknowledge 'equity' groups as the principal clients of VET, rather than the marginalised outsiders. This case will need to be made, using creative and diverse strategies, until VET policy-makers are prepared to grapple with the challenges of recognising that two-thirds of VET clients are identified as members of one or more of the ANTA targetted equity groups (Golding, Volkoff and Ferrier 1997).

There has been current debate on the merits of moving away from a 'target group'-based strategy for addressing access and equity to a 'managing diversity' or 'managing productive diversity' model (Butler 1997). One of the advantages of such a model is that it shifts expectations within the VET system, away from an undefined and unremarked male norm around which the system is constantly (re)built, to an expectation of diversity in the client group. This can serve as a way of permitting all entrants to the VET system to have their needs considered.

However, a major danger of this approach is that 'diversity' can be reduced to a focus on meeting 'individual' needs after the point of entry. This fails to address existing systematic and long-standing disadvantage in access, which is group based, such as entrenched discrimination or long-term poverty and low levels of prior schooling, or being able only to find part-time and casual employment. Another potential problem is that 'diversity' itself becomes homogenised, and the system is judged adequate if it is meeting the needs of some 'diverse' groups, without considering the specific needs of each group.

Under the current 'targetted' focus, a good deal of evidence on the inequitable participation of equity groups has been amassed, and we have a plethora of findings and strategies. While policy documents have made substantial commitments to equity, implementation has been patchy and policy commitments have not generally been effectively monitored or enforced (Connole & Butler 1995; Golding, Volkoff & Ferrier 1997).

In practice, the debate on 'top-down' policy models may be less important than a consideration of what is already in use at grassroots level. Consultations with key stakeholders interviewed for this study suggest that a 'practice' model, which seems to be having some success, is that reported by some NETTFORCE² industry training companies (ITCs) and other key industry stakeholders. These respondents shared a highly

2 At the time this publication was researched, the National Employment and Training Task Force (NETTFORCE) existed as an initiative of Working Nation (c.1994), a project created by the then Federal Labor Government

pragmatic view, fuelled by their need to generate traineeship activity to stay in operation, in the case of ITCs, and by both vision and detailed knowledge of their industry, in the case of other stakeholders. Their approach was to focus on specific groups of employers or potential trainees within the industry, or across industries, in the case of ITCs with cross-sectoral coverage, work out what is acceptable in practice to employers and other key stakeholders, then negotiate with training providers to develop appropriate content and delivery arrangements. Some consideration is given to the particular features and needs of the potential student clients in this process.

This approach has the great virtue of breaking through barriers to the development and delivery of accredited training in areas that have not had access to training or have suffered from inequitable arrangements in the past. One example in this study was the replacement of a private course, for which young women entering one of the lowest paid occupations in the country, had to pay \$800 for their pre-service training, by a publicly funded traineeship. Another interesting feature of arrangements made by these traineeship brokers is their creativity, a feature not conspicuous in the top-down structures of the VET sector in its many recent mutations. Examples of this creativity found in this study came from the rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traineeship broker, with 'job-shared' part-time traineeships with additional literacy and numeracy support, or a range of support features for indigenous trainees in their first three months of a traineeship.

Another benefit in this form of provision when it involves small and specialised private providers is the opportunity to tailor training content and delivery to client needs, including the needs of employers and their employees. There is also less emphasis on formal selection requirements, meaning that women with lower levels of school attainment can enter where they might not through TAFE. Levels of personal support may be high, and many students welcome a less bureaucratised environment.

This pragmatic model, which has elements of the 'managing diversity' approach is, however, unable to deliver affirmative action. This study has not provided much evidence about employer selection processes for publicly funded training, but the little evidence there is, together with discussions with key stakeholders, suggests that what becomes entrenched is 'more of the same'. Employers choose trainees on the basis of their past recruitment strategies and, insofar as potential trainee needs are considered, it is the needs of those currently in the occupation. Thus, for example, if the occupation has a history of recruiting women from non-English speaking backgrounds, there may be some consideration of their needs in developing the training arrangements. If, however, there is no such history, these needs will not be considered. Few providers in this study saw women with multiple disadvantages as their target group and were attempting to recruit or support them.

Indeed it would be possible to conclude on the basis of evidence of the outcomes of national plans of action for women in TAFE (NPAWT), and some preliminary comments from the current round of studies under the National Women's VET Strategy that affirmative action strategies aimed at

access to the system are effective for precisely as long as they are resourced with funding and equity expertise, and that gains are quite difficult to sustain. It can be argued that what is needed is not further policy development in this area, but ongoing resourcing and support for initiatives which operate not only on selection and choice, but also on quality of delivery. It might be worth exploring what potential there is for brokers of training to develop strategies that could enhance affirmative action, with some additional funding and equity support.

Issue: Evidence from key stakeholders, training providers and training participants in this study suggests that employer-based selection processes may replicate existing patterns of occupational access, including existing inequities. For women entering non-traditional occupations and for multiple disadvantaged groups of women entering occupations where they have not been represented in the past, efforts are not made to recruit or support entry. Consideration needs to be given to the potential for brokers and providers of training to develop strategies that could enhance affirmative action, with some additional funding and equity support.

Implications for new training arrangements

Many of the elements proposed and introduced as part of new training arrangements under the NTF were identified as success factors for women in this study. These included strong links to employment, immediate relevance of training, competency-based learning and assessment requirements that did not emphasise 'book learning' but were directly linked to employment competencies, and training that enabled participants with unsatisfactory school experiences to begin a career path.

These features were enhanced further by providers who acted as employment brokers or employers, for example, through group training arrangements. They could take action in the case of trainee or provider dissatisfaction with the employment setting, or the trainee losing their job. These providers could also facilitate subsequent employment and further training where they saw it as part of their brief, or were explicitly funded to do so.

Issues of access

It was argued strongly by key stakeholders in community services, and identified by participants and their training providers, that women require multiple pathways into training and that over-reliance on traineeships with a 'training wage' component will exclude some women. This is particularly the case for adult women employed as casual labour without training on near full-time hours, who wish to undertake training. These women often cannot afford to drop back to the traineeship wage, and respond by attempting to combine the traineeship with other employment inside or outside the traineeship occupation, or abandon the traineeship. The continuing growth of casual and part-time service-sector work with insecure employment, and women's patterns of participation, mean that

women have high levels of horizontal mobility at 'entry level' and may need to engage in repeated retraining.

The study did not provide direct evidence of similar issues for women in IT and telecommunications, due to the nature of the focus groups sampled in these industries. There was some evidence of similar issues for adult women in the non-traditional trades groups.

What is successful for women can be seen in training arrangements described in the study, or outlined by key stakeholders. In the study, adult women with family responsibilities were extremely satisfied with a TAFE community services course with a flexible delivery option, which enabled them to choose their level of participation, in which minimisation of costs to participants was foremost among the training provider's objectives and in which fees could be paid by module.

A key stakeholder in aged care outlined the alternative training arrangements for entry-level training to the occupation of assistant in nursing, often entered by adult women and NESB women. Three alternative forms of delivery were being offered, one entirely on the job through large employers, in work time where possible, one as a full-time, pre-service option and one as a traineeship. All had their particular client groups. This is the kind of flexibility that is required.

There are two issues that intersect with the question of adequate income. One is the increased complexity of training arrangements. 'Hybrid' arrangements involving multiple sites and providers appear to be becoming more common. They impact most on adult women with family responsibilities and are exacerbated by low income, not having access to reliable private transport and responsibility for getting children to child care or school. They are further exacerbated if the women are also trying to earn additional income in a second job.

The second issue is the lack of availability of part-time traineeships. Many participants found full-time study and work a difficult and exhausting combination, in conjunction with other responsibilities. In addition, some of the traineeships and other courses had been customised to deliver their curriculum in a shorter time than the TAFE courses from which they had been adapted. This added further to the pressure on students.

Issue: A range of forms of training alternative to traineeships need to be preserved to meet the needs of adult women in entry-level training, and in the workforce where training is becoming available for the first time. Advice needs to be provided to ITABs, training brokers and providers on the development of alternative pathways into entry-level training for women, including part-time traineeships. It is desirable that full-time new apprenticeships with a training wage not be the only entry-level pathway into occupations.

Forms of support

Once women have entered the VET system through public providers, support for their specific needs, such as language and literacy support, child care or support with disabilities is available, no doubt differentially

through the system but at least as a baseline, which gives these needs legitimacy.

For private providers this issue is much more difficult. The private providers consulted in the current study were scarcely rapacious multinationals; most had strong community links with churches or community-sector organisations and many articulated a social justice focus. Many operated on tight budgets with short-term funding, for example, having to meet ongoing costs, such as rent, from training income and able to employ only casual staff on a program-by-program basis. They did not have the resourcing to provide professional advice and support in English as a second language (ESL) literacy, and could not afford the infrastructure of computers for information literacy.

Regardless of the availability of support, participants in traineeships and other arrangements with a high workplace component, or with multiple sites of training, could not find time to access library and information resource facilities. The importance of this finding will vary with the level of course, but has implications for articulation arrangement with higher-level courses, both in VET and at university, where students entering under articulation arrangements will need additional support in these areas.

Issue: Access to and use of libraries and other information literacy resources needs to be monitored under new training arrangements, especially in training that articulates with further VET and university courses.

Another element of support identified as critical by almost all groups of participants was personal support, in terms of confirmation or clarification that learning is 'on the right track', and reassurance of achievement for women not confident of their learning skills. This kind of support is not an 'extra' in the training process; it makes the difference between success and failure.

Issue: The provision of adequate personal support for students by training provider staff should be an element of quality criteria for course delivery tenders, and should be included in the professional development materials in training packages.

Education and training pathways

Both training providers and key stakeholders were concerned about pathways into and beyond current training. Participants also identified their current training as one step in a longer career path, often designed to remedy past disadvantage or inability to access training.

The loss of labour market programs as pathways into traineeship training was of particular concern for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups and for women with multiple disadvantages, women re-entering the workforce or entering after low levels of school attainment. It would seem that the VET sector may become the provider of such bridges through pre-certificate and Certificate 1 delivery. Schools will also provide many such programs where they articulate with traineeships.

Issue: The study suggests a need for a policy focus on accredited traineeship programs at Certificate 1 or 2, which have levels of support built in for entrants who have been unemployed or have special needs, and which articulate with higher-level traineeships. These programs should not be delivered at an accelerated pace.

Women showed high levels of awareness and interest in planning career and further education paths from their current training. They did not always find it easy to access information to do this. Providers also reported that applicants needed information about paths into the course they were inquiring about if they could not immediately meet its entry criteria.

Issue: Information about pathways through a whole suite of courses at various levels needs to be built into training packages, possibly as part of the qualification levels section of the endorsed components of a training package. Mechanisms are also needed to disseminate this information to potential applicants.

Delivery

The study findings confirm that 'flexibility' in delivery is contested terrain. The needs for flexibility for women as users are in conflict with the needs for 'flexibility' for employers, and also with the needs of large institutional providers to meet system requirements in terms of information and resourcing. Only large TAFE courses exhibited characteristics of flexible delivery within the course in terms of variety in delivery mode, time and location, and choice of elective elements. Other courses might have some flexibility in initial arrangements, for example, the time pattern of delivery, but could not provide variety within the course, thus excluding some potential participants.

It is possible that new training arrangements, especially those negotiated between employers and private providers, or developed by private providers to meet identified needs, will be ad hoc, once only arrangements. Because women sometimes need to leave courses for family and personal reasons, for example, pregnancy, geographic shift in their partners' employment or family circumstances, they may lose the opportunity to gain a qualification. Women in traineeships also feared not being able to return to the traineeship if they did not complete it.

Issue: Some elements of new training arrangements may decrease flexibility for women as clients. All providers need to consider a variety of delivery arrangements for women. TAFE providers, who may be in a better position to offer client flexibility within courses, need to continue to offer alternative provision to traineeships. There is a need to monitor the availability of 'flexible delivery' in terms of choices for course participants. Arrangements for participants to exit and re-enter courses must also be built into delivery arrangements wherever possible.

Assessment

Increased workplace assessment will be a feature of new training arrangements. The study provided some examples of highly successful

workplace assessment by training providers in community services, which students appreciated for its relevance and for the care taken in the assessment process. Overall, however, the study found less workplace assessment than expected. In particular, little data were available about workplace assessment in emerging and non-traditional industries.

There were also no instances in the study of workplace assessment used for RPL purposes, as a first step in training provision, although one provider indicated a future shift to this. This was an issue of importance to some key stakeholders, who had evidence that women may not 'step forward' for training if the first step is perceived to be assessment.

Success factors in workplace assessment by training providers included clarity about the assessment task, prior rehearsal and coaching, student control of what is assessed and when, having met the assessor prior to assessment taking place, knowing it is possible to be retested and confidence in the assessor as fair, unbiased and ethical. There were no substantial instances of self or peer assessment in the study.

Providers and key stakeholders, in discussing workplace assessment, identified the need to work closely with employers in establishing employer assessment. They also reported difficulties in getting management of enterprises to take responsibility for assessment and in organising training for assessors. The need for an 'assessment culture' to develop in organisations was stressed by key stakeholders.

Key stakeholders, providers and students in areas with small business enterprises reported unwillingness of employers to be involved in assessment, and some instances of unsatisfactory practice. The close relationship between employer and employee was a factor in some instances of assessment problems in the study, and was also reported as problematic by key stakeholders. Students also made the point that some community environments were unsuitable for assessment purposes.

The potential for conflict between employees and employers in workplace assessment in community service areas, where funding pressures or profit requirements could conflict with workers' views of what constituted good care, was also raised. This question could have application in other industries.

Issue: The study has added somewhat to our understanding of what is important in workplace assessment for women, and this material could provide useful information for ITAB contracts for non-endorsed elements of training packages.

Issue: It seems likely that the shift to employer assessment will be slow and uneven, and may require considerable provider support. Providers will need to be resourced adequately to develop resources and provide training for employer assessment, and to monitor the process closely.

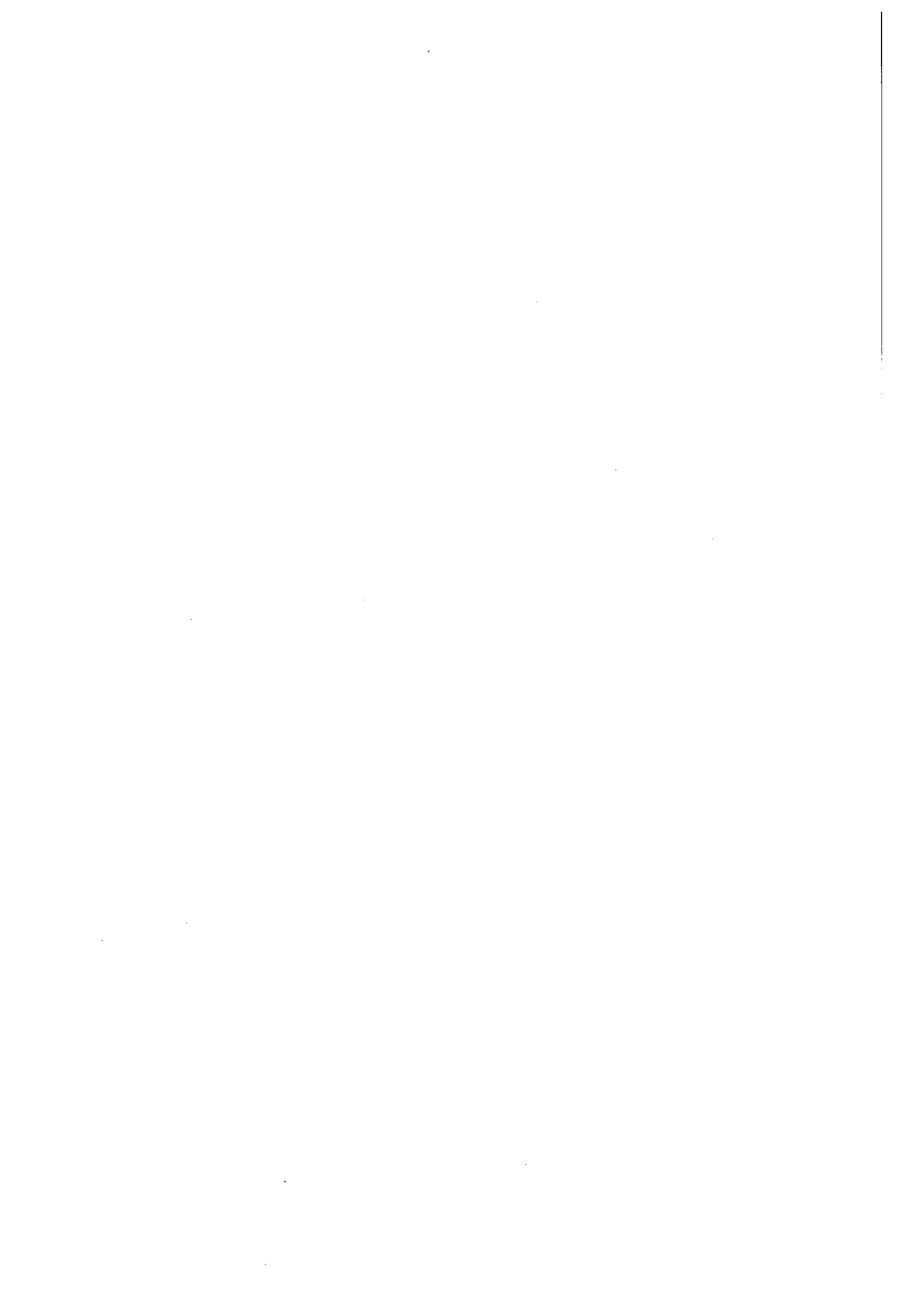
Issue: Further research is required to evaluate the impact on women's participation and outcomes of assessment against standards by workplace assessors. This could be done as part of the ANTA review of training package implementation.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

This study was focussed on the requirement in the project tender brief to produce:

... findings in relation to women's experience of vocational education and training and advice with respect to the critical factors in women's success in vocational education and training. These findings will be derived from an investigation of the following segments of training provision: marketing of training; selection processes; enrolment procedures; and delivery of curriculum.

(ANTA 1996, Tender Brief 96-026)

In discussions with ANTA and the project reference group, subsequent to the awarding of the tender, the project was considered in relation to other current research projects under the National Women's VET Strategy. The requirement to examine marketing of training was removed and replaced with an emphasis on how women took the initial steps to access their training programs. It was also agreed not to include adult and community education provision in the study.

The study included:

- ❖ a literature search and review, leading to a draft summary report to identify critical factors to the success of women in VET
- ❖ preliminary interviews of selected key stakeholders with relevant industry and provider expertise
- ❖ focus group discussions with a representative sample of women currently in education and training in selected industries across the VET sector
- ❖ interviews with training providers and employers associated with the focus groups

Key stakeholder interviews

Key stakeholder interviews were conducted in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. Some were conducted jointly with the consultant for Phase 2 of the study. They were used, together with the literature review data, to frame the questions for focus groups, and for training provider and employer interviews, and also provided a valuable source of suggestions for potential focus groups.

Qualitative study of women's experiences

The sample

Potential focus groups were identified by members of the project team and project reference group and by key stakeholders and their contacts. Some constraints on selection were imposed by the time frame and funding of the project. Despite the generous provision of information and offers of assistance, many leads proved unusable through low numbers of potential participants or time constraints on their availability.

Five groups were conducted in New South Wales, three in Victoria, three in South Australia, two in the Australian Capital Territory and one in Queensland. Two groups were in rural towns with the remainder in metropolitan areas.

By level of qualification, groups ranged from one advanced diploma and two at diploma level through apprenticeships, one prevocational course, a group of Certificate 4 courses, some Certificate 3, an access group and a school group at Certificate 1 level.

A diversity of provider profiles was also achieved. Of the 14 groups, six were provided through TAFE alone. In another four a TAFE provider was involved, but in conjunction with a traineeship arrangement through an employer, NETTFORCE arrangements or tendered by a private provider or group training scheme. In two groups training was delivered by registered private providers and two involved registered community providers.

In terms of employment and training arrangements, there were two traineeship groups, a further 'cadet' group were employed under training arrangements similar to a traineeship, and one group had apprentice members. Two groups were made up of employed women. Two groups comprised unemployed women or women returning to work and study. One group were school students, some of whom were in work experience programs organised through their schools. Five groups, all with TAFE as provider, were diverse, with employed women, some changing occupations, women combining study with family commitments or undertaking training in order to join or rejoin the workforce.

NESB women were present in six groups, making up approximately 10 per cent of the sample. Almost all were in the traditional industries.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were represented only in the two groups from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) programs, again both in traditional industries or general access, and made up approximately ten per cent of the sample.

Women with a disability were present in three groups in addition to the special group conducted for TAFE students, and comprised approximately eight per cent of the sample.

There were two groups of rural and isolated women, one of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and one of child-care students in a large TAFE open learning program with a national intake. These groups in total

made up approximately 15 per cent of the sample. In addition, a large proportion of one IT group were from rural areas, although they had moved to a major city to undertake their training.

Women in transition, for example, from school to work or mature-age women (re)-entering the workforce, were well represented in the sample. Approximately one quarter of the sample comprised young women entering training from school, from unemployment or from part-time work. In addition to this, another group of young women in their final year of school were interviewed. Similarly, women returning to the workforce and older unemployed women seeking employment made up just under a quarter of the sample.

Overall, the sample conformed with the requirements of the project brief. There were fewer NESB women than originally planned, owing to a change in the composition of one group. It had also been hoped to include more traineeship groups than the two in the sample; two providers were obliged to substitute another group for trainees, due to timetabling changes and other reasons.

As a profile of women's participation in VET at present, the sample over-represents women outside mainstream TAFE provision and in more workforce-oriented forms of training. This was a deliberate decision. However, there is no representation of women whose training is wholly on the job, and where the employer is the training provider. This is a significant gap in the data.

Focus group profiles

Certificate 4 in Community Services (Child Care): delivered as a traineeship by a private provider, who also employed the trainees through a group training scheme. This group was predominantly young women. Some had been employed as casual workers in child-care centres and some had entered through labour market programs, also offered by the training provider. Employers were predominantly commercial child-care providers. This program was delivered at an accelerated pace, in comparison with equivalent TAFE courses.

Diploma of Community Services (Child Care): delivered full time and part time, entirely by flexible delivery, by a TAFE provider. This group comprised school leavers to mature women, and had a high proportion of women with family responsibilities. The group comprised students from all years of the course. Some were studying full time, some combining part-time study with caring for their children, some had been employed in the field as casual workers and were looking for qualifications, and some planned to change careers into child care. Most were from rural towns, but training providers reported that about 20 per cent of the course intake came from the city, where on-campus courses were available. These students were attracted by the flexible delivery mode. Field placements for this course involved mainly community child-care centres.

Certificate 3 in Community Services (Child Care): delivered full time to Aboriginal students by a TAFE provider. These students were mature

women, although other intakes had younger women, and a few men, as well. Some had casual child-care employment experience, and all were hoping to gain employment in the field. Many were returning to work and study. Their field placements placed them in a range of local child-care centres, including Koori centres. The course lost nearly half of its intake in the first weeks of study, but graduates of past intakes had a high rate of either employment outcomes or university entry.

New Work Opportunities Labour Market Program: for assistants in nursing, in nursing homes, standards-based and accredited with articulation and credit transfer into a traineeship. The private provider was a church organisation with close links to the CES and involvement in labour market programs. Participants were unemployed women with an age range from 17 to 50, some were from NESB and some were women with multiple disadvantages, with low levels of formal education.

Certificate 3 in a health area: delivered as a traineeship by a TAFE provider. Students were young women in employment in small businesses, in an occupation whose members are all women, which has very low wage rates and insecure employment. This course replaced a public sector and private sector course. It is now the only pathway into the occupation in this State (Victoria), although a 'catch up' version of the course is being offered to people without training, already employed in the occupation. The program was delivered at an accelerated pace in comparison with the programs it replaced.

A single subject in community management: the introductory subject in a TAFE diploma in community management, offered through a large community provider, with a TAFE staff member as tutor and articulation in the diploma. Students were adult women employed or in voluntary positions in community service organisations. They wanted a short introduction to the subject as they were not attracted to a course the length of a TAFE diploma and some preferred the community provider for its perceived friendliness and for the time the course was offered: every second Saturday morning.

Certificate 4 in Community Services (Volunteer Coordination): with a non-profit community provider acting as a private provider. The group were all coordinating volunteers, some in association with other community management work. They were employed in a wide range of organisations, not all in community services. Some were returning to work, or working part time. Several had school-age children. Two of this group were university graduates.

Certificate 3 in Indigenous and Community Welfare and Certificates 1 to 3 in tertiary and vocational preparation: for indigenous students, with a TAFE provider in a rural area, with articulation to traineeship training in several industries. This group were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with some additional health and community workers, and was co-facilitated by an indigenous health worker. Most of the group were adult women and many were seeking employment for the first time.

Women with disabilities in a TAFE institute: most of whom were women with intellectual disabilities. All were studying in fields that are traditional

women's occupations or gender neutral and many were either in work or work experience. Some of this group were in mainstream courses, but most were in special access courses.

Advanced diploma level telecommunications course: with a 'cadet' group employed by a major telecommunications employer, and TAFE as their training provider. This group of both first and third-year students had entered the course as school leavers. They were a high achieving group who could have entered university engineering degrees. The course was delivered with blocks of off-the-job and on-the-job time, and was also accelerated in pace. There was some on-the-job informal training but no formal on-the-job assessment.

TAFE Diploma in Information Technology: in the process of an upgrade to an advanced diploma, which has multiple exit points at Certificate 3 and 4. The course is offered both full time and part time with day and evening classes and an open learning delivery option for some of the course. There are two intakes a year, with a mix of school leavers, young unemployed, people in full-time employment in the industry, people changing career or retraining, following retrenchment, and some women returning to work and study. This was a small group of adult women not currently employed in the industry.

Certificate 1 in Computer Skills for the Office: with a TAFE provider to a Year 12 school group, who had come from local high schools and were taking the subject to increase the range and depth of computing options in their final year. Articulation and credit transfer to TAFE computing courses was available.

Prevocational program with a combined electronics, engineering and automotive focus: 16 weeks full time. The provider was a specialist agency for women's employment operating as a group training company, with a substantial component of the program subcontracted to TAFE. The course was delivered in three locations, the provider itself and two TAFE institutes. The group consisted of a wide range of ages and contained young women, women changing careers and women returning to work and study. The group had completed the electronics and engineering sections of their course. This was another program with an accelerated pace of delivery.

Mixed trades group: organised through a TAFE provider and a women's support network for women in training in non-traditional trades. The group comprised apprentices in building and construction, automotive and horticulture, and some women employed in the industries who acted as a support group. The provider for the apprentices was a TAFE institute.

Methodology

The purpose of a qualitative methodology for the study was to enable a representation of the voices of women currently in the VET system, and their views of factors important in their success. It is difficult to collect this kind of data by survey methods. The strength of the current methodology was the opportunity it gave women to discuss their training in groups,

which led to some extended discussions and thoughtful reflections, and which enabled a richer understanding of how women make decisions about and evaluate their training experiences.

The study methodology was approved by the University of Technology, Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee and followed its requirements. Permission was sought from training providers and individual participants to conduct the study, and consent forms were signed by all participants.

Interview protocols for the focus groups and for training provider and employer interviews can be found in Appendix 2. Focus groups were audiotaped and transcripts produced as data files. Training providers were interviewed for all 14 groups. It was not possible to identify an appropriate employer for all groups. For groups where an employer interview was feasible, it proved more difficult than anticipated, to obtain participation, and only four employer interviews were conducted. Interviews with training providers and employers were recorded as written notes by the researcher.

A significant constraint on the focus group process was the short time (usually an hour) available for access to most groups. This was particularly the case for traineeship groups, for whom a lunch hour or a voluntary after-hours session was frequently the only alternative. The limited time available for information-gathering resulted in a decision not to collect individual demographic data from participants.

Time constraints also shaped the depth in which questions were explored, with greater attention given to elements of women's experience associated with more recent forms of training, especially workplace training, and least attention to features characteristic of mainstream TAFE courses. The rationale for this decision is that more research has been conducted on women's experiences of TAFE and least is known about new forms of workplace delivery.

All data were analysed using qualitative descriptive methods to identify major themes and issues. Particular care has been necessary in data reporting to protect confidentiality. Participating organisations and groups are not listed, and the data presentation does not report identifiable details of groups or individuals. This constraint has been more than balanced by the frankness with which participants volunteered information.

Direct quotations from the focus group transcripts have in some cases been shortened to remove repetitions, hesitations and less relevant material. These deletions are marked as ellipses (...). Each quotation is separately identified, except where direct flows of conversation are reported; these are recorded without line spacing. Replacement of identifying information, or explanatory additions are marked in brackets. Questions from the researcher are not italicised.

Strengths and weaknesses of the data

The study data demonstrate the experiences and concerns of a broad group of women currently in the VET system. Both the women interviewed and their training providers were generous in their provision of information

and comment. For the most part, information provided by participants and their training providers was congruent.

While the sample is broadly representative of women in VET, it is limited by its small size and by the absence of women in fully on-the-job training with an enterprise provider. It is also limited to only three industries, and large areas of women's employment are not included. The short time frame for the focus groups was also a limitation in terms of the range of questions and issues which could be raised.

It proved easiest for women to talk about their own experiences, especially difficulties and obstacles they had encountered, and about what they hoped to gain from their training. It was much more difficult for them to identify factors which might lead to success in more abstract terms. It was also difficult for groups to comment on the impact of likely changes to the training system, for example, the introduction of workplace assessment.

The groups had surprisingly little to say about forms of selection and enrolment that have been concerns in terms of gender equity in the TAFE system. For some groups, the nature of their training arrangements simply made these issues irrelevant. Others appeared to take selection criteria and their enactment as routine or as what might be expected for their industry. Similarly, there was little useful comment on alternative forms of delivery, with most groups enthusiastic about the form of delivery they were currently experiencing. It was not easy for groups to speculate on who might have been unable to participate in their current form of delivery.

Appendix 2: Focus group and interview protocols

Focus group protocol

Background

- ❖ Course you are studying
- ❖ Stage in course (beginning/middle/end)
- ❖ Part/full time
- ❖ Working?

Access and selection

Probes: Access

- ❖ What led you to decide to do this course?
- ❖ Had you done any VET before this, what was it like?
- ❖ Now to this course, how did you find out about the course?
- ❖ Getting information about the course before enrolling:
 - Was there anything about this that suggested women had been considered as clients, for example, references to women, photos, stories, relevant content, delivery that met your needs? Any assumptions about what women would and would not be interested in or be able to do?
- ❖ Deciding to do the course:
 - Did you get information on job and career prospects to where the course might lead?
 - How important was accreditation?
- ❖ Did your employer know, why/why not, and was there any support there? (Probe small business here.)
- ❖ Overcoming barriers, for example, fees and charges, lack of information, was there anything else?
- ❖ Was there anyone you know who decided not to do the course? What stopped them?

Probes: Selection

- ❖ Was there a selection process? What was it based on?:
 - Probe workplace selection and informal criteria and fairness and stereotype, for example, too old.
- ❖ How were you successful in getting selected?

- ❖ Were any of the requirements a worry to you (like needing to have experience or work in the area, or particular prior knowledge or subjects)? How did you overcome these?
- ❖ Was there anyone you know who was not selected? Why do you think that was?

Participation

Probes: Enrolment

- ❖ Was there a choice of electives or subjects or specialisations?
 - If so, what information and advice did you get on the implications of these choices? What was helpful? What was needed? Again, probe assumptions about women.
- ❖ Were you assessed for/able to apply for credit for any part of your present course because of study or work you had done before, through RPL or experience?
 - If so, how was this done? By whom? Comments on how satisfied you were with the process and outcome? What skills did it pick up/omit?

Probes: Delivery

- ❖ What was attractive about the provider of the course? Why this provider (did you have a choice)?
- ❖ How did the delivery mode suit you, for example, time of classes, way classes are run, any workplace components, flexible delivery or open learning components? Any choice of delivery mode?
- ❖ How was the course structured? Were you able to do it in chunks and get credit for each? Was this important?
- ❖ Who might not the current delivery mode have suited?

Probes: Learning support

- ❖ How do learning activities draw on your experience? Were you given a chance to talk about it? Did you feel accepted? How was this shown? What were the obstacles and difficulties in this area?
- ❖ Quality of teaching? Was there support and help with any difficulties you might have had? (Probe especially in on-the-job training, who 'teaches', what does it consist of?)
- ❖ Access to things you need, for example, library, computers, child care, help with writing, assignments, literacy, numeracy, careers advice, course counselling, personal counselling.
- ❖ Usefulness of content, new learning (or repeated what I knew already), degree of challenge, interest and relevance. Responsiveness of content, able to get the content you want?
- ❖ Experiences with staff/other students
- ❖ Anything particular about being women that has been a good or bad feature of your experience, for example, things people assume, bias in course materials?
- ❖ Women who dropped out during the course: why do you think they did? What enabled you to go on?

Assessment

- ❖ What kinds of assessment have you experienced? What are your comments on their contribution (or not) to success. Was it designed to help you learn? Were there any obstacles, difficulties you could foresee with this type of assessment?
- ❖ Was there any practical or workplace assessment? What was that like? Where was it done and by whom? Were you satisfied with it? How good a job did it do of testing knowledge, skills, application? (Probe shallow checklist approaches.)
- ❖ Any obstacles, difficulties you could foresee with this type of assessment? (Probe power and gender stuff, favouritism, stereotyping.)
- ❖ Was the criteria clear? Did you know what you had to do?
- ❖ Have you any suggestions to improve assessment?
- ❖ If people fail assessment, why is this do you think? How have you overcome obstacles in this area?

Outcomes

- ❖ What would 'success' be for you, from this course? What would count as 'success'?
- ❖ What was the main thing you wanted from the course? Are you getting it?
- ❖ What might you do next with the learning/qualification you have gained? Have you been able to use it?
- ❖ How have you changed as a result of the course?

Training provider interview

Background

- ❖ Name of course
- ❖ Level
- ❖ Length
- ❖ Delivery modes—time and place, on/off job, hours per week
- ❖ How course came about, relationship to standards, any training package development going on, how and where curriculum developed
- ❖ How training/provider is funded
- ❖ Staff, casual or permanent, gender ratio
- ❖ Course documents

Access and selection

- ❖ Who does the course attract; reasons women undertake it, information dissemination strategies, how people find out about it, pre-entry counselling, attempts to attract women?
- ❖ Do students work as well as study? Is work in occupations related or unrelated to the course?
- ❖ How does selection criteria affect women? Are there places for targeted equity groups? Are statistics kept for target groups? What are access and

equity policies on selection? What is done to recruit in areas of low representation?

- ❖ Other access and participation issues for women, for example, timetabling, fees, child care, gender ratios, need for and availability of support and what kinds; support for specific groups.
- ❖ RPL: what kinds are available, how is it done, are costs an issue? What are the outcomes? What are the other issues?
- ❖ Course counselling: is there a need for it? Are there electives? What are the implications and issues involved in these?

Participation

- ❖ Needs of women in the course; how they are met; obstacles to their ongoing participation; their drop-out rate; their reasons for dropping out.
- ❖ Needs the course has had to meet: institution/provider, students, employers and enterprises, and how adjusted they are for these; conflicts in needs and how they are resolved.
- ❖ Good and bad features of curriculum and learning processes; any customisation of curriculum, and for whom; conflicts in this.
- ❖ Presence and amount of work experience and workplace learning; how it is managed; visits to workplace; roles of workplace staff; issues in these.
- ❖ Gender issues in participation; how it is managed; the sources, if any, of gender equity advice; how advice gets to teaching staff.

Assessment

- ❖ Kinds of assessment; who assesses and where; issues in good and bad features of assessment; experience of workplace assessment and its issues.

Outcomes

- ❖ Student destinations from course; further training and employment; pathways; articulation. Who gives information on pathways and how/when?

Employer interview

Background

- ❖ Name of organisation, background information if appropriate
- ❖ Scope of training

Access and selection

- ❖ Recruitment strategies used and why
- ❖ Questions about the proportion of women in the occupation and why (i.e. why do you recruit the people you do?)

- ❖ Shifts towards/away from gender segregation
(For non-traditional areas):
 - Is women's employment important to the enterprise and why?
 - What needs to be done to get women in?
 - What is the impact on industry/enterprise of women entering?
- ❖ Level of skill required for the job, and issues of skill requirements
- ❖ Training priorities for the organisation
- ❖ Decisions about investing in training:
 - For what groups and why?
 - Is accreditation important?
 - Is choice of providers important; were there any problems in this area; anything specific to women?
 - Is customisation important?
- ❖ Aware of competency standards and move to training packages?
Comments on these
- ❖ Do women access training? Any issues or barriers, any intervention by you? Any sources of advice on this area?
- ❖ Costs of taking on anyone 'unusual' for the occupation
- ❖ Selection criteria and who gets selected/not
- ❖ Issues of language and literacy
- ❖ Specific support available/needed

Participation

- ❖ Issues of workplace training vs off the job, anything specific to women?
- ❖ Delivery, what 'flexible' means for enterprise
- ❖ Quality of training providers, what is important to you?
- ❖ RPL
- ❖ Assessment

Outcomes

- ❖ What training leads to; what is in it for organisation and employee; career paths for the group
- ❖ Encouragement of pathways and how women find out about them

Appendix 3: Literature review— Women in specific equity groups

Women from Non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB)

Stephens and Bertone (1995) conducted an extensive interview study of NESB women workers from across three industries (vehicle, metals and engineering and food), with workplace case studies. This study found that NESB women were consistently interested in workplace training in order to get a better paid job, learn more skills, make work more interesting and learn more about changes in technology. Participation in training outside work hours was not possible, however, and sharply diminished the proportion of NESB women participating, in comparison to NESB men and other workers. Where English language training and industry training were offered in work hours, NESB women's participation was much higher. The study highlighted the structural barriers to women's participation, in contrast to the common practice of locating 'problems' in NESB women themselves.

Mawer and Field (1995) in a national workplace study of NESB people, based on consultations, interviews and site visits across several industries, highlighted the monocultural orientation of training reform which advantages one group, 'young, male, highly educated and who have sound English language skills' (1995, p.1). The majority of employees in the lower Australian Standards Framework (ASF) levels are then cast as a 'disadvantaged' minority and have their needs defined as minority issues. Inequity is designed into the system and equity is then viewed as a cost, increasingly difficult to meet in a privatised and competitive training market. Despite generalised commitments to equity, real progress requires specific criteria for the achievement of access and equity in the mainstream, resourcing, strategies to achieve outcomes, monitoring and the capacity to reward good practice and act on non-achievement of outcomes (1995, p.2).

Relevant findings from this study included the observation that vocational curriculum is often not geared to operator-level training, and that inappropriately difficult English language requirements are especially problematic for NESB people. Removal of these barriers requires skilled intervention, which is generally not put in place. Slow implementation of RPL is occurring through lack of awareness, resourcing and adequate criteria for judgement, and a lack of structural incentives for its implementation. Specific skills, such as bilingual and bicultural skills, are ignored. Language and literacy training can be perceived as a threat, used to sort out those employees whose skills are 'inadequate' for retrenchment.

Assessment planning does not involve NESB people, and assessor training does not include specific strategies to eliminate bias and discrimination. The effects of this cycle, following the introduction of training, can widen the gap between NESB and English-speaking background (ESB) employees.

Bertone (1995) cites no less than nine recent Australian studies which confirm that NESB women are 'significantly disadvantaged in their access to training of all kinds' (Bertone 1995, p.8). Besides the lower levels of training provision faced by women generally, access to English language training, failure to recognise skills and stereotyping were major issues. A further set of smaller qualitative studies demonstrated a continuing pattern of lack of access to structured and accredited training, and a wide range of workplace impediments to participation, including work organisation, delivery outside work hours and English proficiency.

Bertone's study utilised interviews with key stakeholders and focus groups with NESB women workers. The interviews demonstrated a high level of expertise in relation to the issues and confirmed the literature review findings. However a number of positive outcomes, including outcomes for operative-level workers, were reported. The focus group data demonstrated very positive attitudes to training and satisfaction about training and related processes, where they had been made available. However there was criticism about lack of access to English language training, discrimination and favouritism in the provision of training opportunities, inadequate information about training, non-recognition of skills and lack of RPL. Training offered was narrow, enterprise-based, not accredited and not linked to any change of workplace structure or provision of more interesting work, hence the title of the report *Training for what?*

Strategies suggested include specific attention to RPL and recognition of linguistic and cultural skills as valuable in the workplace, integration of English language and vocational training, representation of NESB women in decision-making about training, no training outside working hours wherever possible and greater information for workers.

Consultations in relation to NESB women for the National Women's VET Strategy also provide relevant data. These include:

- ❖ inflexibility of current delivery in VET
- ❖ inadequacy and cost of skills recognition in the workplace and in VET institutions
- ❖ access to English language and literacy training
- ❖ variation of needs within this group, recognising especially refugee and recently arrived women
- ❖ cultural sensitivity issues
- ❖ lack of family support for VET participation
- ❖ bureaucratic processes and complex enrolment procedures
- ❖ inadequate support such as child care

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women

There are a number of recent research reports on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and VET (TAFE NSW Multicultural Education Unit 1995; McIntyre, Ardler, Morley-Warner, Solomon & Spindler 1995; Teasdale & Teasdale 1996; Clarke [forthcoming research report]). The strength of these reports is that they do include extensive consultation with learners. However, much of this work does not disaggregate its findings by gender. It is not possible to confidently assume that issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will easily translate into issues for women (Teasdale & Teasdale 1996). Similarly, McIntyre et al. (1995, pp.74-76) recognise gender differences in the 'stories' of learners. Clarke (forthcoming research report) notes that skills and labour market development for males is a priority in rural and remote communities, and there is a need for more emphasis on women's potential in indigenous labour markets. She also notes that women should not be limited to 'domestic' occupations, but should also have access to technical and manual occupations. Thus information referring specifically to women has been summarised below, with some noting of general issues.

A further issue is the complexity and difficulty of generalising about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people given their range of social and geographic circumstances, the high proportion of rural and remote communities and the differences even among those communities in terms of VET needs (Clarke forthcoming research report). The primary principle for VET provision stressed by all researchers is the need for local consultation and self-determination.

Some findings on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's participation in VET from the NCVET Graduate Survey suggest that women's participation is lower than the Australian average for women in all fields except health and community services, where it is higher. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were also over-represented in general educational and preparatory fields of study (TAFE NSW Multicultural Education Unit 1995, p.41).

Teasdale and Teasdale (1996, pp.34-39) cite 1994 NCVET data which show that women make up 48 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments in VET, and are clustered predominantly in basic employment, educational preparation and operatives: initial fields of study. Of the smaller numbers in Stream 3000 courses (excluding trades) women are slightly more highly represented than men, while men dominate in trades. By field of study, nearly half of all women are studying in multi-field education, nearly one fifth in business, administration and economics and other significant groups in arts, humanities and social sciences, services, hospitality and transportation, and health and community services. Graduation rates appear to be highest in courses in which women are strongly represented.

Survey data from this study suggest that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents were disappointed at the paucity of course offerings they could access and were readily able to name a wide range of employment-relevant topics which they would have been interested in

studying, a point reinforced by Clarke (forthcoming research report) in her study of rural and remote indigenous communities in Queensland.

Another finding of interest to women was the high proportion of respondents (18 per cent) with sole responsibility for a child or children. Other relevant findings included the high proportion of classroom-based lecture instruction to which respondents had been exposed, their preference for learning in groups rather than individually by distance education, the importance of enclaves and support networks, a very low rate of recognition of credit, or of RPL, and a strong desire to progress from preparatory courses.

McIntyre et al. (1995) in their summary of learners' issues and concerns note that the most important element of success was recognition of Aboriginality at each stage of the course, including a significant indigenous perspective. Also important were indigenous students and staff, culturally sensitive staff, a delivery mode which recognises student needs, flexibility of time schedules to allow for family priorities, and on-campus and family/community support. They conclude with a plea to recognise VET as a cultural and cross-cultural activity for indigenous Australians. A second critical recognition is that programs must be designed as culturally appropriate at each step of the planning and delivery process, and also implemented and adapted stepwise, with appropriate local consultation.

Issues arising from the National Women's VET Strategy consultations for this group include:

- ❖ concerns about the emphases in the VET sector on accreditation and vocational outcomes, in comparison with the strong support from indigenous people for access and bridging courses, and the needs for these
- ❖ variation of needs within the group, particularly rural and remote
- ❖ the culture of a formal bureaucratic VET sector based on individual competition and deadlines, in conflict with needs of women who may not have family support for study
- ❖ language needs
- ❖ culturally appropriate RPL
- ❖ delivery issues, including flexibility, more indigenous trainers, use of technology

Women with a disability

Little research information about this group was found in the literature search. Lawless (1992) in a National Plan of Action for Women in TAFE Project on women with disabilities in TAFE, undertook an analysis of existing provision across States and Territories, and conducted consultations with key stakeholders and interviews with disabled students in South Australia. She identified major issues as inadequate information on options, services and outcomes from TAFE, and inadequate levels of support at all stages of the process of entry and participation. Costs of study and associated factors, such as transport, were difficult to meet.

Availability of transport and difficulties with physical access and safety after dark were also problems.

For this group the consultations for the National Women's VET Strategy confirmed the findings of an earlier ANTA consultation, and included:

- ❖ improving consultation
- ❖ relevant and accessible information provision for the disabled, their trainers and employers
- ❖ commitment to accessible and flexible training
- ❖ resolution of funding issues associated with modifications and support

Rural and isolated women

Butler and Lawrence (1996), in their recent review of VET provision for rural and remote Australians, provide both a detailed literature review and findings from consultations with rural and remote women. Their literature review revealed the diversity among rural and remote women and their needs, problems of strong gender stereotypes that limit women's choices, child care as a critical issue, the need for regional consultation and planning, and training to meet women's needs in agriculture. These were in addition to general issues of locational disadvantage, lack of access and low participation in education, and needs for VET information and services.

Data from this study include some findings specific to women. In relation to access and pathways, the loss of 'lifestyle' Stream 1000 courses, or their full fee-paying nature, represent the dismantling of a very important bridge into VET for women. Women's need for child care was also strongly expressed. The report also contains a detailed analysis of more general issues and strategies, including delivery, client issues and content/curriculum.

Consultations for the National Women's VET Strategy identified the following issues:

- ❖ issues of distance, cost and accommodation
- ❖ technology as a possible solution, but one which imposes its own problems in terms of access, skills for technology use and the absence of social contact in technology-mediated delivery
- ❖ lack of VET understanding of the particular issues for rural women, especially in terms of lower levels of education
- ❖ recognition of existing skills
- ❖ access to accredited training
- ❖ restructuring, leading to high training requirements in agriculture

Women in transition

Young women (ages 15 to 24), making the transition from school to work face specific issues in the labour market. These include the almost complete unavailability of full-time work, substantially higher unemployment and lower incomes (Townsend 1995, in WEATCU 1996, p.6). In 1994, 67 546

more young men were participating in VET than young women (WEATCU 1996, p.8).

The needs and experiences of a particular group of young women making the transition from school to work, those attempting to enter non-traditional training, have been discussed above. More general information on young women's experience comes from a recent ANTA funded project (WEATCU 1996). The study used a national consultation model, but did not directly consult with young women.

This project found that young women still make traditional gender segmented choices in entry to TAFE courses. Some further findings were the need for delivery to take young women's needs into account, for example, by short courses that articulate and provide credit transfer for accredited training, attention to regional networks for enhancing training and employment opportunities, and the promotion of VET to young women.

The project also found that young indigenous women were significantly disadvantaged in relation to young women in general. Factors in this included discrimination and refusal to employ them in areas open to other young women, for example, retail, negative school experiences and poor post-training outcomes, resulting in 'a crisis point' for this group. Young women in remote communities have needs for literacy and life skills as a first step into training, and appropriate responses must be identified within each community.

For young women, the National Women's VET Strategy consultations identified gender issues in the pathways from school to post-school options, and the range of influences on these, as important.

Mature-age women (re)entering the workforce were the focus of a WEATCU, (1995) study in the western Sydney region. This region has experienced low levels of educational qualifications and income, and high unemployment. There is a high level of 'hidden' unemployment among women. The study found that women lack information about training structures and opportunities and find selection criteria for TAFE courses hard to understand. Fees can be a barrier since women's partners may be unwilling to pay them when unsupportive or opposed to their participation. Lack of confidence is an issue that needs to be addressed in selection and early stages of participation. RPL is a critical need for mature-age women, especially for their generic competencies. Literacy and numeracy are major issues, as is caring for family members who may be aged or ill. Pathway issues included the usefulness of Stream 1000 courses as a beginning, and the need for short modular enrolments to provide flexibility.