

'DON'T BE TOO POLITE, GIRLS!' A REPORT ON A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW OF WOMEN, WORK AND VET

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1. Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) has a long history in Australia, as elsewhere. However, the 'official' history of women as active participants in VET and the relationship between women and VET in Australia is an unfolding story, much of which is located in contemporary times.

Under the auspices of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) we conducted in 1998 a critical literature review focussing on the multi-disciplinary, cross sectoral field of 'women and VET'. The extensive report of this work will be published by the NCVER in late 1999. The purpose of this paper is to outline the work and present some of our major findings.

Specifically, the two major aims of the review were:

1. to provide material useful to policy makers and practitioners in planning responses appropriate to the nature and scope of women's disadvantage in VET; and
- to provide guidance to researchers and research funding bodies on gaps in the existing research and the direction of possible future research.

The report also serves a related purpose- that of collating a selected body of literature from disparate fields of significance to the focus of 'women and VET' into one bibliography. It is hoped that this bibliography will provide a useful resource for a wider audience with an interest in this field.

2. Approaches, Understandings and Boundaries

Any investigation that focuses on 'women' *per se* runs the risk of being described as essentialist in its approach, especially if it attempts to position *all women* into a unitary category. The category *women* encapsulates many differences between women; it also contains most other groups designated by nomenclature such as equity, disadvantaged, special needs or target populations. Following extensive theorising, lively international debates and ever emerging understandings and practices around concepts of women, gender and difference/s, we found ourselves in the ambiguous position of both ascribing to 'new' feminist knowledges and the need for new forms of politics, while needing to work pragmatically, politically and sensitively with the category *women*- at least in the short term. While this tension is addressed briefly in the report, the limitations inherent in talking about or speaking on behalf of 'women' are acknowledged.

As implied in the wording of the first research aim of this project (see above), women are perceived as disadvantaged. This association of women and disadvantage mirrors the assumptions and ideologies inherent in the equity target-group approach to women that forms the basis for equity policies and practices in VET. For these reasons, consideration of understandings of and approaches to equity and especially equity as it relates to women in VET are central to the report. Also necessary is consideration of the troubled and inter-related concepts of social justice, equality and equity, albeit briefly.

Within the broad field of 'women and VET', the focus of our work was women as students and potential students in vocational education and training. This excluded both the women who work in VET and the literature relating to women as workers in VET. While accepting this limitation, we acknowledge the significance of the labour, whether paid or unpaid, contributed to VET by so many

women, and especially those efforts undertaken primarily to benefit women as VET students.. 'Women as workers in VET' is an area of research in its own right and is worthy of increased investigation.

INVESTIGATING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET)

Over the past decade, vocational education and training has assumed a pivotal position in national policy interest in Australia. This has been driven by an increasing belief in (and reliance on) the ability of VET to contribute to enhanced economic competitiveness through its contribution to maintaining and developing a skilled workforce. Throughout this period, VET has experienced a continuous and radical reshaping of its activities at all levels. The significance of the period from the promulgation of Australia's National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) in 1987 until August 1998 has been used to the boundaries of the literature included in the review.

As an area of policy and practices, VET is complex, multi-faceted and ever changing. The boundaries between the school sector and VET are weakening, with the establishment of VET in secondary schools. The boundaries between VET and adult and community education (ACE) are blurring, resulting in attempts to re-articulate definitions of both and investigations into mutuality and differences in provision of VET and/or ACE. Similarly, many VET courses now articulate with or are granted credit or advanced standing in university (higher) education awards in the ongoing pursuit of 'seamless' lifelong education. Given the scope of VET, this study provides a partial and selective analysis of aspects of VET considered especially relevant for women.

When considering issues of gender, it is important to investigate implications of the culture associated with VET, and the mirroring of this culture in workplaces. We note that this has been traditionally a masculinised culture, reflecting the association of VET with trade-related courses, for predominantly male-dominated trades, delivered in technical and further education (TAFE) colleges. The pervasiveness of this culture in workplaces is now more important, given that an increasing amount of workplace learning is recognised formally as VET.

In interrogating the literature relating to women and VET, it is necessary to draw on that relating to work and women's position in the workforce. It is also important to consider the relationship between learning for work (VET); work-related implications and outcomes; patterns of segregation and new challenges in an increasingly globalised world. Popular framings of 'work' are both ideological and deeply gendered. 'Work' is perceived as synonymous with employment.

It is also necessary to consider the significant role that policy plays. What policy approaches are called on? What is framed as a policy 'problem', why and by whom? What have been the relationships between policy and research and the gender agendas for both? What are the politics of power inherent in policy discourses and the discursive practices of various policy actors? How and where is equity positioned in these events? Who has benefited; who has been marginalised or left out? How have equity advocates and women participated? Have they had the space and the political voice to actively shape policy, or have women's efforts and interests been directed to responding to policy 'requirements'? What are the implications for women?

THE LITERATURE

Approach

For this review we interpreted 'literature' as written (English language) text. As it was a critical review, the approach we took was analytical rather than descriptive. Key themes and issues were identified, competing views noted and assessed. The literature relevant to the topic is drawn from many different academic disciplines; from both within Australia and overseas; from diverse community groups and organisations including government and non-government organisations. It concerns women from a wide variety of backgrounds who may identify with any number of the equity category groups associated with systemic and policy approaches to VET in Australia. Much of the literature contains comment on the VET system, which in turn is reflected in this critique. Sources were identified through a wide ranging search utilising electronic data bases; selected library collections; bibliographies; other research reports; letters, telephone calls or electronic mail to key organisations, women's networks and groups, individuals both in Australia and elsewhere, and finally the authors' extensive professional and personal collections.

Boundaries

In constructing the bibliography and drawing on the understandings discussed above, we used the following criteria to assist decision making for selection of material deemed appropriate for inclusion:

2. the work provides significant information for contextualising VET, work and women
3. the work concerns VET, or the intersections of VET with employment, higher education, adult and community education and/or schooling
4. the work addresses gender issues directly or indirectly, with the main emphasis on women
5. the work explains or illustrates an approach, or approaches to policy
6. the work originates in Australia or is relevant to, impacts on or illuminates the Australian context, and
 - the work concerns the period 1987-1998, or is important in gaining an understanding of some aspect of this period.

Although most of the works included in the bibliography are published, some unpublished works were included to ensure that important contributions to the literature were not overlooked. We also wanted to include works by community organisations and groups that may not be widely disseminated and some outside the limited range often drawn on by academics and policy makers.

Three factors in particular hindered the identification, collecting and collation of the literature for the bibliography:

- *Hidden Authors* - there is a surprisingly large number of works that fail to indicate an author, or place the name of the author/s where it is difficult to find, making correct attribution and citation of such works problematic. Many such works are produced for committees, by government and non-government organisations and often are outcomes of funded research
- *Hidden or Inaccessible Works* - locating relevant literature, particularly relevant literature outside the limited range used most often by academics and policy advisers, is problematic. Many are not listed in appropriate data bases or located in libraries and are only found by careful scrutinising of reference lists or bibliographies; of internet websites; or especially by word of mouth. In some cases access to a particular work can only be achieved by a considerable financial outlay and so at times was not possible within the limited resources of this study. Much valuable commissioned work (including research funded by public moneys) is often not widely released or is embargo-ed for various reasons (including controversial findings).
- *Gaps in the Literature* - important gaps have emerged as a result of the search and analysis, along with the implications of such gaps. This factor is discussed further in the report, in relevant sections including areas for future research. While not a 'gap' *per se*, it is also important to acknowledge that much of the history of women and VET in this country is still in the form of undocumented oral histories; that is, there are very many women who are the embodied holders of important local knowledges of a breadth of events, struggles and issues that may never be recorded as 'literature'. There is also a smaller number of women with extensive and in-depth personal and practical knowledge that could inform a national record and interpretation of women and VET in Australia, both prior to and especially for the period since the Kangan Report (1975). It is our sincere hope that some mechanism/s and resources are allocated to documenting this critical history, to ensure that such important knowledges do not become permanently fixed as 'gaps in the literature'.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report was compiled into the following four main sections.

Section One - Locating VET- context and controversies

This section locates VET within the wider social, economic and political landscape, which impacts directly on the institutional arrangements and goals that determine VET in this country. Economic reform, social trends and implications of globalisation are discussed, prior to turning attention to the approaches to work utilised in VET. More specifically, the position of women in the workforce is

considered, as are enduring patterns of segregation that are intimately connected with approaches to vocational training for women, through VET.

Section Two - At the margins of the narrative: women and the culture and history of VET

This section reviews quantitative and qualitative data on women's participation and experiences within various VET settings including work-based training, ACE and commercial colleges. From this work it draws some conclusions about the dominant (masculine) culture of VET and its impact on women, and goes on to investigate the strength and sources of this culture as a major legacy of the TAFE system and its preceding era of 'technical education'.

Section Three- Women, equity and VET: rhetoric, readings and realities

The task for this section is to investigate the relationships between women as students (or clients) of VET, and VET related approaches to, and understandings of the concept of 'equity'. This is necessary, as women have been approached as a target or equity group within the VET system, rather than designing and implementing a gender inclusive VET system. Given the inter-relationships between VET and the adult and community (ACE) sector, and VET and schools, contemporary trends relating to women and girls in the sectors are discussed briefly, along with implications for VET.

Section Four - Disciplining Differences: policy research findings and gaps

This final section considers approaches to policy, and women-centred strategies that have been undertaken by and within VET. Through mapping the drivers of national policy, with various policy responses, an overview of the systemic approach to women is presented. Finally, major findings are categorised into six clusters, prior to identifying potential research gaps for future work in the area of women and vocational education and training.

3. Major Findings

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature relating to women and vocational education and training (VET) generated over the last decade is extensive. It is drawn from many different academic disciplines; from both within Australia and from overseas. It includes the work of individuals, research teams, diverse community groups and government and non-government organisations. It concerns women from a wide variety of backgrounds.

The literature reviewed both forms and indicates a substantial body of knowledge in relation to women and VET. However, much remains unpublished, obscures authors' names, and is difficult to locate. The difficulties associated with ready access to literature in the latter category limits its potential as a resource for policy-making and strategy planning.

The literature reveals considerable research activity concerning women and VET. It is noted that equity-related research is not accorded the same significance as so-called 'mainstream' research in VET. While it can be argued that equity-related research has resulted in positive impact on localised pedagogical and practice issues for women, there is little evidence of significant policy or structural systemic outcomes. Most equity research is funded from government related sources. Most often, this research:

7. is undertaken to inform or support policy decisions and therefore is driven and framed by political and ideological agenda. As such, it has been more re-active than pro-active
 8. is piecemeal, so that it is difficult to assemble a comprehensive picture of change
 9. tends to consider women as 'other', while normalising the experiences of men, and
- lacks a perspective of 'advantage' as opposed to 'disadvantage'.

WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US ABOUT WOMEN, WORK AND VET

A full understanding of the impact and implications of social and economic change on and for VET would benefit significantly from attention to women, for

Women's experiences are a mirror to the future. Women experience first hand the extent to which the current institutional framework - including labour market structures and the social infrastructure - has failed to keep pace with the changing technological, economic, social and political realities (OECD 1994, p 13).

Women have clearly articulated what they want from VET. Women's goals recognise both the 'education' and the 'training' aspects of VET and often reflect a lifelong learning focus. As half the population, women are not content with being second-best, but seek acknowledgment as legitimate clients whose needs are considered equal to those of advantaged groups. This means ceasing to make 'arrangements for young men and then making unsatisfactory running repairs to the system to accommodate women and other equity groups' (Connole 1997, p 1).

The business of equity has never been central to the 'real' business of VET. There is little understanding of what equity means at a national level and there is a reluctance among policy-makers to act on recommendations of equity-related research that call for structural or systemic changes that would see equity become a central organising principle within the VET system.

Aggregated participation data for the VET sector indicating that women's participation in VET has improved in the past decade hide many continuing problems including clustering in fields of study and at lower levels, less employer-support for external training, under-representation and low completion rates in apprenticeships in non-traditional areas and lower retention rates in traineeships in group training companies.

These problems, and the stronger preference by women than men for VET courses in the 'personal enrichment stream' are partially explained by qualitative data indicating that women in VET continue to experience a highly gendered culture that fails to take adequate account of the complexity of their lives and experiences and to recognise their commitment to employment. Particularly in non-traditional areas women continue to have to deal with unacceptable and inappropriate behaviour from employers, students and teaching staff. In addition, some of their difficulties have been compounded rather than ameliorated by reforms to and in VET, such as 'flexibility', which disadvantages some women by giving a higher priority to the needs of industries and enterprises. Even in the female-dominated ACE sector, specific strategies to meet the needs of particular groups of women receive limited follow through.

Diminishing commitment to equity in the contemporary marketised VET system will continue to present even greater challenges, including that in an environment increasingly dominated by 'user-pays', women's lower level incomes will inevitably wind back the small participation gains observed.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The literature review reveals a consistency in research findings and recommendations that seek structural systemic change in the VET system, including the political will to position equity as a central organising feature. Such an endeavour is increasingly urgent for the development of a dynamic and rigorous VET system able to position itself pro-actively in times of rapid global change. Another necessary feature is that of consistent policy linking VET and other related economic and social policy areas.

Ongoing collaborative and participative effort including that of effective research activities to shape an inclusive VET community and sector might be shaped around seven themes:

Globalisation and Change

The changing nature, organisation and distribution of work; the 'feminisation' of work; inter-relationships between global/local, labour market and vocational education and training implications for women; the 'imperative' of change in VET- a gender analysis; the continuation of enduring patterns of segregation and emerging new divisions; shifts in concepts of knowledges, skills and training for work for women; and the role of the state, and equity for women.

Social, Cultural and Demographic Changes

The implications for and impact on women and VET of changes in the lives of women produced by political and cultural 'homogenisation' ageing of workforces, the marginalisation of youth, changing work/family relationships; and changing patterns and locations of 'class'. The role of VET in creating social capital.

Policies, Politics and VET

Changing shapes of institutions of the state, and implications for women and VET, including 'big picture' research of significance to women; the inter-relationships between other sectors, disparate policies that need connecting (eg industry policy, economic policy, social policies, industrial relations, rural and regions development); policy making processes and outcomes within VET, including analyses that consider issues related to politics, privilege and power. The positioning of equity within VET (as in any of the other categories); and consultation that difference for women.

Marketisation of VET

Regulation/de-regulation, and implications for women/equity groups; the inter-relationships between markets and equity contracts; the implications of national 'market' policies and practices for local practices; feminist/women friendly economics and VET; the relationships between accountability, measurement and equity; policy and practice accountability for women as clients of VET.

Economic and Social Policies and Practices for VET

The role of women in economic and social development; the interplay between paid and unpaid work in the labour force and VET; VET, women and sustainable economic and social growth; compound disadvantage, women and VET; the inter-relationships between social, cultural and economic capital, women and VET; women, intellectual capital and VET; and futures for women in and through VET.

Gender Issues in VET

Structural and systemic transformation of the institution of VET to inclusivity rather than exclusivity; a gender analysis of the structures and systems of VET bureaucracies; conceptual/policy frameworks for equity, women and VET; equity, difference/s and public goods in VET; the relationship between advantage and disadvantage; men and women; differences and diversity within VET; shifting to 'equity imperatives' as well as 'economic imperatives'; the shifting interrelationships between masculinities and femininities in VET; the relationships between VET for women and girls in schools, ACE, post-compulsory education and work; and men, masculinities and VET.

Curriculum, Pedagogies and Practices in VET

This continues as a significant area for ongoing women-centred and feminist research, much of which has already established a significant 'baseline' for on-going critical work.

PROPOSALS FOR ACTION

Drawing on our experiences in performing the review, and the emerging findings and understandings, we put forward three proposals for further action:

1. The establishment of a funded and accessible 'mainstream' collection point, archive and clearing house for research that covers the broad area of women and VET.
2. A major research project updating the comprehensive and informative work undertaken by Pocock (1987a,b; 1988, 1992).
3. The establishment of a scheme providing untied research grants for VET operating in a similar fashion to the grants awarded by the Australian Research Council.

NAMING THE REPORT

The most lasting impression that remains with us from this literature review is the enormity of the volume and scope of the work that has been undertaken over the last decade, mainly by women, in the optimism that their work would benefit others through enhanced opportunities and outcomes from vocationally oriented education and training. As this report finds, much of the policy oriented research work has been project based, and in fact designed to 'inform' or support policy implementation, more than to shape, challenge or transform policy. Although the VET system has undergone fundamental changes, the VET approach to 'the women problem' remains problematic. Indeed, it is difficult to establish direct causal links between the variety of VET equity strategies and the number, location and status of women participants in and graduates of VET, and improved women's participation that has eventuated indirectly following wider societal changes.

Despite the efforts of the last decade and beyond, the culture and practices of VET remain masculinised, as do its structures and processes. Women and those with a commitment to equity for women have worked diligently to make the system more inclusive in its approach and equitable in its outcomes. In retrospect, this effort could be framed as 'political housework' (Butler 1997a); as trying to 'change women to fit the system'. It is well time to recognise that women comprise over fifty per cent of the total population; that systems such as VET can no longer afford to consider women as outsiders or 'exotic'. Rather, the political will is required to design and implement systems that serve women as well as they do some men. Being 'polite' has yielded little in the way of fundamental reform for women in VET.

For these reasons, we have used the name of a well known song of women activists and workers - 'Don't be too polite girls' for the title of the report. This is one of the first feminist songs ever written in Australia (Melbourne) and is still one of the most popular.¹ As expressed in the words and through the sentiment of the song, equity is worth fighting for. Despite the time span since the song was written, there is still much to be achieved in the name of a 'fair square deal' for women in and through VET.

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¹ *Don't be too polite girls* is set to the tune of *All among the wool, boys*. Lyrics by Glen Tomasetti. The focus of the song is the struggle for equal pay.