

Small Business and Environmental Management Training: Its value and importance

A report to West Coast TAFE

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1. Executive summary

The purpose of this report was to explore environmental education for small business, outlining its importance, why it is needed and current practices in the education and training sector in order to inform West Coast TAFE of how they could best meet small business environmental training needs. The outcomes of a local environmental education program for small business, a series of longitudinal studies on local small business environmental practices and academic journal articles were used to gather the information for this report.

The overall results show that while small businesses have a small individual environmental impact, collectively they contribute to a large proportion of pollution. Unfortunately they often fly 'under the radar' on environmental issues, as the focus is more on big business. This is compounded by the fact that many small business owners generally lack environmental knowledge. Therefore in order to bring about any change, they need to gain that knowledge.

Better environmental education has been posited as an effective method of addressing small businesses negative environmental impacts. But there are few environmental education programs specifically for small businesses and most are one off events, mainly offered by local governments or by private training organisations. Environmental courses at a tertiary level are generally aimed at those who want to pursue a career in the environmental field rather than being applicable to assist businesses to better manage their environmental impact.

There are however strong economic, social and environmental reasons to embed environmental education for small business into the Australian education system, particularly within the TAFE structure, given the applied nature of its offerings. In order to be effective, environmental education for small business should: raise awareness of why environmental management is important; give practical, targeted advice; prepare participants for current and future environmental legislation; include best practice examples; be embedded into existing curricula; take into account developments in environmental education at all government levels; involve government and industry; and most importantly, convince small businesses of the business case for change.

The role of small businesses in developing and implementing better environmental management practices must be conveyed in a unified, systematic approach by all intermediaries. West Coast TAFE has the opportunity to be a leader in this area as a key local provider of environmental education to small business.

2. Introduction

This report focuses on environmental education for small business, outlining its importance, why it is needed and current practices in the education and training sector. The report concludes by discussing how environmental education could be most effectively developed by West Coast TAFE to meet the environmental training needs of small business. By embedding a strong environmental management focus into units and courses, aimed specifically at small business, West Coast TAFE can lead the way in Western Australia and nationally, in this area.

3. Methodology/Research procedures

Several sources of information about environmental education for small business are used to inform this report, including:

- Information and feedback from SMERC's Green Advantage for Small Business program^a, including follow-up phone interviews with participants, that gained insight into their attitudes and practices since attending the program, and results from the 'Green Advantage for Small Business 2008' survey, which was distributed to program participants.
- Results from the '2008 Small Business Environmental Education Survey' conducted by Dr Janice Redmond, Edith Cowan University.
- Recent SMERC environmental reports, including the 2007 Bellevue Sustainable Industry Project¹ and the 2009 Light Industry Precinct Improvement Project (Cities of Gosnells and Cockburn)².
- Academic journal articles about small business environmental education.

^a The Green Advantage for Small Business program was run throughout 2008 and included 17 events, it aimed to raise awareness of, and educate small businesses on, environmental management. Presenters included: Professor Beth Walker from Edith Cowan University; environmental professionals including representatives from Perth Region NRM (PRNRM, formerly Swan Catchment Council), the Water Corporation and the Sustainable Energy Development Office (SEDO); and 'Green Champion' businesses that are already demonstrating best practice environmental management.

4. Environmental education

Environmental education has been defined by Environment Australia in 2000 as “raising of awareness, acquiring new perspectives, values, knowledge and skills, and formal and informal processes leading to changed behaviour in support of an ecologically sustainable environment”³. Environmental education relevant for small businesses has three key aims:

- To raise awareness of the need for better environmental management in order to change attitudes towards environmental practices;
- To make businesses aware of their legislative obligations and give them professional, specific advice that they can utilise to manage their environmental impacts; and
- To demonstrate how better environmental management processes can have a positive bottom line benefit for the small business.

The term sustainable development is used interchangeably with the term environmental management for the purpose of this report, as environmental management is a part of sustainable development⁴.

As a part of its response to the 2005 announcement of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development^{5,6}, the Australian Government developed the Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future: National Action Plan, which “emphasises the need to develop practical skills that result in improved environmental outcomes, in which VET [vocational education and training] is identified as a key pathway”(p.9)⁵. TAFE therefore is an obvious choice of delivery agent for implementing this plan through incorporation of environmental education into its courses.

5. About small business

5.1. Small businesses current environmental impacts

Small businesses (defined as businesses that employ less than 20 staff⁷) are an integral sector of the economy, in that they:

- Account for 2.1 million businesses in Australia⁸;
- Make up 96% of all business in Australia⁹; and
- Generate just under half of private sector non agricultural employment⁷.

Despite their obvious economic and social importance, small businesses often fly ‘under the radar’ when it comes to the monitoring and legislating of their environmental

behaviours^{1,2}. Many do not engage in good environmental management practices^{10,11}, or only do so to the extent of compliance¹². For example, only 25% of Australian companies have attempted to save water, and only 10% know how much greenhouse gas they are producing¹³. Part of the reason for this is that they have low levels of ‘eco-literacy’¹⁴.

There are significant aspects of small businesses environmental behaviour that are unknown, for example their carbon emissions¹⁵. It is, however, suggested that small and medium sized businesses (medium is defined as employing less than 200 staff⁹) contribute significantly to global pollution, with some estimates as high as 70%^{16,17,18}, making this business cohort a vital part in the environmental agenda.

While the environmental case for improved environmental management is clear, small business owners are yet to be convinced of the business case. This issue is compounded by the fact that the small business cohort are not easy to connect with.

5.2. Reaching the small business cohort

There are four small business traits that make them difficult to connect with and work with cooperatively, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1 – Summary of small business traits.

Trait	Example
<i>Disparate</i> – Small businesses do not think as a collective, and often work in isolation. This isolation makes it easier for them to ignore the individual impact they may be making on the environment.	“It’s only a little bit of waste oil that I am putting down the drain.”
<i>Diverse</i> – Small businesses are represented in every industry sector and every type of business. They are owned and operated by sole traders, limited companies, partners, families and by people of all ages, genders, education levels and ethnic background. The level of business knowledge, skills and competencies varies, but small business owners often have good technical skills but limited managerial competence.	Joe the plumber has done a trade apprenticeship, worked for a while for a very small plumbing business and then started his own business. He is a competent plumber but his exposure to different business and management practices is very limited.
<i>Resource poor</i> – Small businesses generally have less financial resources, time and staff than larger businesses. They see every minute spent away from ‘core business’ as a cost to them.	“I want to know how to run my business better, but I have no one that can mind the shop when I am away.”
<i>Lacking in strategic management foresight</i> – Small businesses tend to function at an operational rather than strategic level and they are reactive rather than proactive on most non-core business issues.	“I am so busy running my business on a day to day basis, that I just don’t have time to look at all the brochures and information that I keep getting sent on saving the planet. I am bombarded with information.”

While these points make small business a difficult sector to connect with, it is not impossible. However, these factors do need to be borne in mind when trying to implement changes to how small business owners operate their businesses.

Convincing small business owners of the business case for change is the best way to make them alter their current practices. This needs to include the 'easy win', which in this case is the opportunity to improve their bottom line, and also a longer term strategy for developing new sustainable environmental business practices, which is through education. However reaching small business through education does have its challenges.

6. The case for small business environmental education

Education "is an influential tool for the instigation of change through all levels of human activity, from the home through to international business activity"(p.4)¹⁹, thus making education a key strategy to achieving sustainable development. Whereas this validates the existence of tertiary institutions, unfortunately most small business owners are not participating in formal education at any level, and "a large proportion of small business owners possess negative attitudes toward formal education and training"(p.64)²⁰.

There are fortunately some relevant examples of small business owners seeing the value and benefit of environmental training. For example, a study on a discrete industrial area in Perth found that small business owner-managers consider education the best method to minimise environmental harm by their sector¹. Moreover, in a study specifically designed to ascertain the level of environmental education in small business owner-managers, 60% of respondents agreed environmental education programs designed specifically for their small business would be useful²¹. TAFE is the logical provider of education and training to the small business sector, as they already have established credibility (e.g. via trade qualifications).

Follow-up interviews with participants from SMERC's Green Advantage for Small Business program, also demonstrated that the program had raised awareness of the link between small businesses and the environment. Quotes from participants included:

"I didn't realise that small businesses have such a big impact"; and

"The program made me more aware of the contribution small businesses make".

These comments and others like them reinforce the fact that environmental education is important, not only for its practical advice, but also to raise awareness of the important role small businesses have in this issue.

Whilst there is legislation that governs businesses environmental obligations, it is inconsistent, administered by many agencies over all three tiers of government and across industries. Of the business owners who responded to two SMERC surveys about business practices and the environment, just under half (43%) reported that they were not aware of the environmental legislation applicable to their business. This is an issue, as business owners cannot comply with legislation that they are not aware of. A consequence of business owners 'not knowing what they don't know', is the increased possibility of unlawful activity, and also an increased chance that the businesses will unknowingly pollute both the atmosphere and waterways.

Educating small businesses about good environmental practice now will also help them to be more prepared for any future environmental legislation that the government may introduce²². If businesses can gradually integrate sustainable practices into their workplaces, it will mean an easier, more cost effective transition if new environmental legislation is introduced.

Compliance is not the only benefit of reduced negative environmental impacts, as being more efficient with energy, water and waste will lead to significant cost savings for businesses. Monitoring power, water and gas bills to see exactly how much is being used is a simple but very effective way of being able to quantify the savings. For example, in one of the follow-up interviews from Green Advantage for Small Business, one business owner reported saving \$200 per month on her electricity bill by simply turning lights and air conditioning off when not needed.

Another example of such savings is a 'Green Champion' business from SMERC's Green Advantage for Small Business program, who saved \$17,000 a year through better management of their polystyrene, cardboard and plastic waste²³. This shows that better environmental practices can have a significant and tangible effect on a small businesses bottom line.

If bottom line savings from simple behaviour change can be clearly demonstrated through education, then the business case for better environmental management can be more positively articulated and made.

7. Current practices in environmental education

At the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, National governments agreed to “integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels of education in order to promote education as a key agent for change”(p.37)²⁴. International examples of integrating sustainable practices, including environmental education, into the education system exist, but Australia’s approach to the issue is less unified⁶. For example, it has been found that current environmental training packages only address compliance and rarely encourage businesses to go beyond their legislative requirements. Whilst environmental behaviours may change as a result, attitudes are harder to change. This is a serious issue as attitude change is one of the cornerstones of continual improvement of environmental practices⁵.

A good example of sustainability being integrated into the education system comes from the United Kingdom, where all sectors of education have their own sustainability programs based around the national ‘Sustainable development action plan for education and skills’²⁵. The Learning and Skills Council, England’s planning body for post-secondary education, has recommended actions such as²⁶:

- *Identify sustainable development ‘champions’: find and train advocates for sustainable development to promote the concept throughout the VET sector;*
- *Promote education for sustainable development: encourage a whole-of-institution acceptance and delivery of sustainable education within VET;*
- *Develop links and partnerships: establish links between VET providers, industry and schools in the delivery of education for sustainability on a national and international level;*
- *Engage with the community: encourage greater community and employer involvement in sustainability education.*

This UK example shows a unified approach to sustainability education and is a good example of a system which is geared towards encouraging a shift in attitudes by all stakeholders resulting in lasting sustainability outcomes.

7.1. A sample of courses currently available in Australia

In Australia there are some existing environmental education programs available for small business, provided by different organisations, including all tiers of government, private enterprise and educational institutions.

Some local governments provide free environmental education seminars and training for business. An example of this is the ‘Switched on Business’²⁷ program in partnership with the South Eastern Regional Energy Group and several WA local government authorities.

This program is free for small businesses to register for, and includes energy, water and waste assessments, one-on-one mentoring and training opportunities with individual business reports as well as follow up energy, water and waste assessments. Another example of a similar program in WA is the Cities of Wanneroo and Joondalup's 'Eco Business'²⁸ program.

Numerous private RTOs offer environmental and waste education programs tailored to business needs. A list of Australian companies who offer environmental training to business can be found on the Greenpages^b website²⁹. Some examples follow^c:

- Envirocom Australia³⁰ - With offices in Queensland, NSW and Victoria, they develop, implement and evaluate environmental education and waste programs for industry as well as Local and State governments (<http://www.envirocom.com.au/>);
- Four Walls And A Roof³¹ - Based in Queensland, they offer tailored sustainability training to business and government (<http://www.fourwallsandarooft.com.au/>); and
- Graham A Brown & Associates³² - Based in NSW, this company provides tailored environmental training in workplaces as well as some public environmental training seminars (<http://www.grahamabrown.com.au/>).

Among the training courses offered by RTOs there are training packages available for businesses to self-administer. For example, the Master Builders Association of Victoria, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's Department of Building and Construction Economics and EcoRecycle Victoria have developed a project called 'The Resource Efficient Builder'¹⁹ which provides information to assist businesses in the building industry to develop and carry out a waste reduction audit. Similarly, the Federal Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts offers an Environmental Management System Tool for businesses, available on the internet^d, consisting of a manual and guidance which businesses can self administer.

In terms of formal education all five West Australian universities offer environmental degrees (see Table 2), however, these are generally stand-alone, tailored to those who want to pursue a career in the environmental field rather than being a course a business owner would take in order to gain environmental knowledge applicable to their business.

^b Greenpages is an Australian online and print directory of sustainable products and services and can be found at <http://www.thegreenpages.com.au>

^c It should be noted that the list is by no means meant to be a comprehensive review of every available program or course available to a business owner, it is simply an overview. Also mention of a particular program should not be taken to mean that it is endorsed by the authors of this report.

^d <http://www.environment.gov.au/settlements/government/ems/tool.html>

This again demonstrates that the concepts of environmental management and business are not often integrated in an educational sense. TAFEs and other Australian tertiary colleges also offer accredited environmental programs and many of these are summarised in Table 3.

Table 2 – Summary of undergraduate environmental degrees offered by universities in WA.

Institution	Accredited courses offered
Edith Cowan University	Bachelor of Science (Environmental Science) Bachelor of Science (Environmental Management) Bachelor of Environmental Health
Curtin University	Bachelor of Science (Environmental Science)
Murdoch University	Bachelor of Environmental Engineering Bachelor of Environmental Management Bachelor of Environmental Science Bachelor of Environmental Technology
University of Notre Dame	Bachelor of Science (Environmental Science) Master of Environmental Management
University of Western Australia	Bachelor of Science (Environmental Science) Bachelor of Science (Conservation Biology and Management)

Table 3 – Summary of accredited environmental courses offered by some Australian TAFEs and colleges.

Institution	Accredited courses offered
Australian College of Environmental Studies	Building Biology (Certificate, Diploma)
TAFE NSW ^e	Conservation and Land Management (Cert II, III, IV; Diploma) Applied Environmental Management (Advanced Diploma) Water Sustainability (Cert I) Electrical - Renewable Energy (Cert IV) Asset Maintenance (Waste Management) (Cert II, III, IV) Sustainable Building Design (Advanced Diploma) Competitive Manufacturing (Cert III; Advanced Diploma) Ecologically Sustainable Development (Graduate Certificate) Environmental Monitoring and Technology (Cert IV; Graduate Diploma)
TAFE QLD	Conservation and Land Management (Cert I, II, III, IV; Diploma) Water Operations (Cert II, III, IV, Diploma) Sustainability Diploma (developed to be studied concurrently with another diploma or for people with relevant diploma/bachelors qualification)
TAFE Tasmania	Conservation and Land Management (Cert II, III, IV, Diploma, Advanced Diploma)
TAFE WA	Conservation and Land Management (Cert II, III, IV, Diploma) Environmental Science (Cert III, Cert IV, Diploma) Sustainability Diploma (developed to be studied concurrently with another diploma or for people with relevant diploma/bachelors qualification)

^e As well as the accredited courses offered, TAFE NSW offers 'Statements of Attainment' in Environmental Studies and Ecologically Sustainable Development. TAFE NSW also developed a customised environmental training course for Wrigley covering environmental compliance requirements, resource conservation and waste reduction, as well as function specific training for groups within the organisation.

It needs to be acknowledged that the cost of environmental training, added to the real and perceived barriers that small businesses encounter, results in many small businesses being less inclined to spend money on new processes that will not give them a reasonably immediate return on investment. As previously stated, many small business operators are reactive rather than proactive when it comes to change as they tend to think operationally rather than strategically.

7.2. Where are the gaps in small business knowledge regarding the environment?

It is difficult to generalise on the environmental knowledge that small business owners do or do not have when it comes to environmental practices. However, what is known from The Australian Industry Group report is that “Large firms were more informed on environment issues than small to medium firms” (p.22)¹³. In fact, the assertion that small businesses generally lack environmental knowledge is recurring in the literature¹⁹.

Some specific examples of knowledge gaps can be gathered from the Green Advantage for Small Business participants. When asked if they were aware of the environmental acts and regulations relating to their business, 32% responded no, and when asked if their business had an environmental plan, 70% responded no. The Australian Industry Group¹³ had a similar finding, with only around a third of all companies participating in their survey having a written environmental policy. When broken down into business size, this figure was only around 16% of small business owners.

Knowledge gaps regarding water disposal were identified in the Bellevue Sustainable Industry Project¹, where 48% of businesses reported that they did not treat their wastewater prior to disposal, and when asked where the water from the storm-water drains went, only 38% were able to give the correct response.

In a more recent environmental education survey²¹ five specific areas were identified where the majority of small business owner-managers perceived they only had a poor to fair knowledge. These areas were:

1. environmental law;
2. cost benefit analysis;
3. environmental planning;
4. biodegradable materials; and
5. air pollution control.

Again, these examples are from specific types of businesses in specific areas and hence the issues found may not be generalisable to all small businesses, however, they do

demonstrate that gaps in small business owners' knowledge exist, and environmental information targeted to specific industries could prevent these knowledge gaps from occurring. TAFE is well placed to develop knowledge around these areas, in particular cost benefit analysis, as this links in with general management skills.

8. Effective environmental management training for small business

The role of environmental education is not simply to educate people on environmental management. As a person's behaviour can be influenced by their beliefs and attitudes^{33,34}, environmental education should also aim to increase awareness of current issues in order to encourage attitude changes which will lead to sustained improved environmental behaviour. Changing attitudes is one of four factors that can affect the effectiveness of environmental programs.

The second factor that can influence the effectiveness of environmental programs is how applicable participants perceive the information to be to them. The Bellevue Sustainable Industry Project¹ found that of the those who reported increased interest in the environment after participating in the study (61%), 71% attributed this to support given during the project. This indicates that giving personalised attention to businesses and their owners is an effective way to help them to change their attitudes, which as previously noted, is an important part of environmental education. This is supported by the literature which indicates that a focus on business-specific needs is necessary to achieve small business engagement with environmental education^{19,20}. Whilst possible environmental programs offered by TAFE may not be able to cater to specific businesses, the TAFE approach of delivering 'hands-on' learning fits well with the needs of small business for practical and specific advice and education.

Linked to the concept of targeting environmental education to specific industries, is the argument that education regarding sustainable practices should be integrated into VET as a generic skill, much the same as occupational health and safety has been⁵. Whilst it is important for a sustainable perspective to be integrated systematically into education systems as opposed to in an ad-hoc manner, a generic program may not be successful in generating enough interest to make the attitudinal and behavioural changes which will lead to improved environmental practices. In order to integrate environmental management into a curriculum in a manner which is both systematic and effective, it may be necessary to offer both a generic environmental awareness element that can be used across all disciplines as well as an element that is targeted to specific disciplines.

Thirdly, the fit of environmental courses or units offered by TAFE into those offered by other institutions should be taken into account. A systematic approach to integrating sustainable development into educational institutions at a micro-level will ensure consistency and conformity across an organisation and the same is true at a macro-level. This will ensure that Australia's approach to sustainable development and the environment is more unified than it is currently⁶. As described in an Australian Government report on sustainability education in VET:

Current industry engagement with sustainability processes is taking place without VET involvement, community organisations and industry are developing their own courses in sustainability, yet a standardised package still does not exist.
(p.11)⁵

Lastly, embedding environmental management practices and measures into appropriate education courses needs to happen. Being able to meet legislative requirements and achieve cost and process efficiencies from improved energy and water use and waste disposal practices are very compelling reasons for business owners to have raised environmental awareness.

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, there are economic, social and environmental reasons to embed environmental education into the Australian education system, particularly within the TAFE structure, given the applied nature of its offerings. Australia as a whole appears to be lagging behind in this important area, so whereas this is a negative observation, it really points to an opportunity for an institution to take the lead.

Small business plays an important role in contributing to Australia's economic, social and environmental goals. Yet it is clear that this cohort is yet to fully engage in good environmental management practices and environmental education is needed to increase the current level of eco-literacy among most small business owner operators.

Education has been put forward by the United Nations and the Australian Government as a key strategy for implementing sustainable development, and environmental management is one of four key components of this concept. Environmental education can raise awareness, allow new perspectives to be realised, and increase skills and knowledge that can lead to behaviour change and improve environmental outcomes. However, there is currently a lack of cohesiveness in Australia's approach to environmental education.

Many institutions offer environmental courses, including government, private enterprise and educational institutions. Generally, these courses are generic and developed from the environmental science rather than business perspective. So are not aimed at existing

business or at individuals wanting to learn about the environment, and there are few cases of environmental studies being integrated into other learning.

In order for environmental management education to be effective, it should:

- Put forward the business case for environmental management;
- Prepare participants for current and future legislative requirements;
- Provide best practice business examples from industry.
- Be tailored to include the needs of specific industries;
- Involve government, industry and the community from the outset;
- Take into account developments in environmental education at all government levels;
- Be integrated into the curricula of educational institutions, not simply added on; and
- Aim not only to give practical advice, but also to increase awareness of the reason environmental management is important.

The role of small business in environmental issues must be conveyed in a unified, systematic approach that encourages a commensurate response from the business and wider community. West Coast TAFE has the opportunity to be a leader in this area as a key local provider of environmental education.

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