



# Increasing Women's Participation in VET and VET Careers

Australian Council of Trade Unions submission.

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## Introduction

VET pathways can be a powerful tool in enhancing female participation in the economy – both by providing greater participation in traditionally male-dominated industries and in providing career progression in other industries where qualifications are less common. However, female VET participation lags far below what is desirable and many VET careers remain solidly male-dominated despite concerted efforts to reverse this trend.

Female VET students face many unique barriers to participation in the VET system and in the careers and occupations that the system serves. There is a lot that can be done to increase their access to the VET system as well as their chances of successfully completing a qualification – reforms and initiatives targeted at directly addressing the barriers women face.

But women are not only women - they are also VET students and citizens and while they face many unique barriers to VET participation, they also experience many of the same barriers that all VET students face, or are confronted by the same factors that discourage VET participation for all students considering their training options. Part of making VET training more attractive to women is to make them more attractive for all students – regardless of gender.

VET solutions cannot be the whole solution, however. We must face the reality that we still live in a society where women's choices, interests and future are constrained by social and economic forces. The VET system can be made as welcoming to women as possible, but this will be largely unsuccessful as long as the forces which reduce and curtail women's full participation in our economy and society are unaddressed. There are actions that we must take to begin to address these barriers which must be considered to be part of the suite of actions we can take to truly deliver a more gender balanced VET workforce.

Additionally, the ACTU would like to express its disappointment at both the timing and the duration of this consultation process. A fortnight-long consultation held in the doldrums of the year is not commensurate with the importance of this issue and reflects an ongoing trend of issues which impact women being relegated to the sidelines of policy agendas. We hope that the message being sent about the relative importance of this issue by this consultation approach is not a true representation of the Department's commitment to this matter and that future efforts will indicate a substantially higher commitment to addressing this issue.

## Responses to consultation questions

### What experiences and lessons can we learn from current or former policies and programs, to inform initiatives to support women to achieve careers via VET pathways?

It is our view that there are a number of lessons that can be learned from the past – both in the form of things that have historically worked well as well as approaches which have failed. These include:

- The fact that supports for women in the VET sector were once more substantive and that these supports have been lost. For example, in the past, many TAFE campuses provided access to childcare on site. Access to convenient and affordable childcare removed a significant barrier to training that many women experience.
- Successful programs in state jurisdictions have already shown success in attracting women, particularly into currently male-dominated trades. Examples of these programs are the SKIP program in Victoria, aimed at women in the disability sector, or the WAVE program which introduced women to the electrical trades. More detail on these programs, and any others provided at state levels, can be found in the submissions made by the ACTU-affiliated state and territory labour councils.
- Careful consideration needs to be given to how the VET sector, and its aims and incentives, interact with the industries being targeted by VET initiatives. For example, traineeships are rare of in aged care or disability because the funding mechanism for these sectors, individual plans funded by government, do not lend themselves to paying for a trainee arrangement. The inability to account for this issue, in a female-dominated industry, leads to fewer employment opportunities for women and to fewer women in those industries undertaking a VET qualification.

### What cohorts of women should VET initiatives specifically target?

While unions are of the view that there needs to be a general focus on enhancing women's participation in our economy and in VET training and careers, there are a number of cohorts of women which we believe would benefit from specific initiatives:

- First nations women.
- Women in male-dominated trades.
- Women working in female dominated industries with low rates of pay, qualification, career mobility or women in leadership positions.
- Women undergoing career transitions (not only in energy and manufacturing).
- Women returning to the workforce.

- Women in rural/remote areas.

### What kinds of vocational and non-vocational assistance do women need to successfully undertake and achieve a VET qualification?

As outlined above, measures designed to assist women to undertake a VET qualification fall into three distinct categories: those aimed at all VET students, those aimed specifically at women and those aimed at achieving broader workforce or societal change. Below is a range of suggestions for initiatives or changes that are needed across these categories. It is our strong belief that it is not possible to undertake measures from category in isolation – this must be a cohesive and simultaneous efforts.

#### Measures for all VET students.

- *Improve quality of RTO delivery* – Despite recent efforts to remove the worst actors, there remain a number of for-profit RTOs who provide poor quality training on a systematic basis. This includes low quality classroom learning, insufficient or completely lacking work placements and poor assessment practices. These providers remain a driver of the lowering esteem of VET education in the wider community, which acts as a disincentive for all students, including women, when considering their training options.
- *Improving VET in Schools* – VET in schools remains many people’s first experience with VET and for many it is not a positive experience. Poor delivery and a focus on inappropriate course provision due to financial incentives drives students away from VET. Exacerbating this issue is the treatment of VET in schools by some schools as an opportunity to separate ‘problem’ students from the wider school population.
- *Access to relevant electives* – despite the title ‘electives’ many VET students have no choice about which electives they undertake. Instead, most are forced to choose those offered by their provider. This, combined with poor funding for many TAFEs over the previous decade, has left many students undertaking outdated but ‘cheap’ electives. An example is the vast majority of electrical apprentices being required to undertake an elective to install copper phone line rather than solar panels or battery technology. VET courses appearing out of date and irrelevant to the realities of work does not encourage women to participate.
- *Better access to accommodation, particularly for apprentices* – Apprentices, particularly in rural and remote areas, are often left struggling to find somewhere to live while on the worksite. Some apprentices, particularly those under 18, struggle to source private commercial accommodation. More must be done to support apprentices in finding appropriate accommodation near their workplace.

- *Flexible options for certificate attainment* – the lack of work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities in female-dominated industries such as the care and support sector leaves women who prefer on-job learning or have other life commitments with few options to qualification. This exacerbates low rates of completion and disincentives enrolment in VET courses, especially in sectors without a minimum qualification. Research and targeted funding is necessary to support the delivery of full-pay traineeships, transitional paths to full qualifications through supervised WIL and higher apprenticeships to support further career progression.
- *Work Placements* – consistent feedback from our affiliates, particularly those in healthcare and social assistance, is that unfunded work placements are becoming a significant burden on people undertaking VET training. While nobody would argue against the value of a work placement, they place a significant financial burden on the student. Not only are they unpaid and time intensive (often meaning normal paid work cannot be undertaken), but they impose additional costs in terms of transport, accommodation and childcare. These financial burdens act as a significant barrier to many people who would otherwise wish to undertake a VET qualification.
- *More effective support* - Many apprentices receive scant support from their AASN – meaning there is little to prevent small problems causing them to leave their course. This is particularly true for women in male dominated industries who may be experiencing negative workplace cultures. Additionally, due to workforce shortages or low funding, there can often be a struggle to provide qualified support in the workplace or for sufficient time to be set aside for mentoring of students on work placements. Provision of better support, both generally and specifically for women, through reforms to the AASN system and funding of more effective workplace support is needed to address these issues.
- *Better data on non-completions* – non-completions remain a significant issue in the VET system and particularly for women. While we have strong data on non-completions, relatively little is known regarding the causes of non-completions. This can make designing interventions to prevent exits difficult. A data project designed at developing this understanding, both generally and with regard to specific cohorts such as women, is needed.

#### **Measures aimed specifically for women in VET.**

- *Procurement targets* – some states, like Victoria, are already seeing success in increasing female participation in male-dominated trades through mandated targets for female apprentices as part of large infrastructure projects. It is critical to note that these programs include meaningful monitoring and compliance – meaning that the targets are

real and there are consequences for employers failing to meet them. Lessons from these successful programs should be integrated into current government plans like the National Skills Guarantee.

- *Safe and Inclusive Workplaces for Women* – Many VET careers are currently male-dominated and have workplace cultures, equipment and facilities designed with men as the default. For these workplaces to be attractive to women, this must change. Achieving this requires actions ranging from the provision of gender-based violence training to employers, employees, trainers and students through to ensuring that available PPE fits women or even the presence of bathrooms or changerooms for women.
- *VET Career paths* – Many VET careers in female dominated industries lack clear career pathways or options to move across industries. This acts as a disincentive to undertake these qualifications. Measures are needed to improve transferability among female-dominated industries and creation of clear career pathways, horizontally (across occupations) and vertically (within occupations) and between the VET and higher education systems. As part of this, the VET system must recognise specialist skills in fast-growing female-dominated industries, like the care and support sectors, where work has become increasingly complex, but training offerings are limited beyond the Certificate IV level.
- *Financial support for women* – the cost of training, including tools and equipment, as well as lost wages during training and low apprentice wages often act as a significant disincentive for women to undertake VET training. Many women need direct financial support to undertake training and this should be strongly considered in order to increase training uptake. Specific scholarships for women should also be more widely utilised. Initiatives that provide financial assistance for women to develop their careers should also be considered.<sup>1</sup>
- *Better application of RPL processes to women in transition* – RPL processes are often focussed on technical skills and fail to properly measure and recognise soft skills. This will be a more significant issue in future as industries in which women with these skills undergo transitions, as is occurring in banking. The RPL process needs to capture these

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<sup>1</sup> An example is the The Ngangkita Ngartu (Aboriginal Family Birthing Program) at the Women's and Children's Hospital in South Australia supports women to work with midwives to develop awareness and skills related to midwifery practice. [Women's and Children's Hospital • Ngangkita Ngartu \(Aboriginal Family Birthing Program\) \(wch.sa.gov.au\)](http://wch.sa.gov.au)

skills more effectively to allow women to have their skills recognised in the form of a VET qualification when they are undergoing a career transition.

### **Broader measures to increase women's economic participation.**

#### Caring responsibilities

One key barrier to women's workforce participation is caring responsibilities which prevent women from working or mean they are far more likely to work in part time, casual or insecure jobs. The three key contributors to this are unequal caring responsibilities, the inaccessibility and high cost of paid care, and inflexible working arrangements that punish carers. Measures to address these challenges include:

- *Universal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* – A significant barrier to women's workforce participation is the affordability and accessibility of ECEC. The inaccessibility and cost of ECEC exacerbates the pressure on mothers not to re-enter the labour force. The provision of free and universal quality early childhood education and care, delivered by highly skilled, properly paid and securely employed educators will make paid and quality care accessible to all and remove this barrier.
- *Expanded Paid Parental Leave* – The Government's recent expansion of the PPL Scheme is very welcome and an important first step. However, even once the Scheme is expanded to 26 weeks in 2026, it will still be amongst the least generous schemes internationally, ranking in the bottom third. Expanding the Paid Parental Leave scheme is necessary to better recognise and support the unpaid care work done by women. It is also essential to shifting the burden of that unpaid care which currently disproportionately falls on women, by incentivising fathers and partners to be more involved in the care of children at an early stage. International evidence demonstrates that it is father's solo use of parental leave that drives change in father care behaviours and delivers greater gender equality between parents in the care for young children and paid work. International research also shows that the highest rates of utilisation of PPL by fathers are in countries with designated periods for men that provide paid parental leave at high income replacement levels as well as incentives for fathers to take leave. However, a 26 week PPL Scheme does not allow enough time to quarantine a reserved period of leave for solo care by fathers/partners. In order to successfully shift gender norms and encourage more equitable sharing of care between men and women, the PPL Scheme should be expanded to 52 weeks by 2030; paid at the greater of a replacement wage or the full time national minimum wage; and incentivise use of leave by fathers and partners. Superannuation should be paid on top of all forms of parental leave.
- *Stronger access to flexible work* - To re-enter the world of work, or to take on the hours that best suit them, workers need working arrangements that can best complement their



caring responsibilities. Many women are forced into insecure forms of work due to the lack of secure jobs that provide flexible working arrangements. Building on recent reforms, the National Employment Standards should provide stronger access to secure family friendly working arrangements - for example reasonable grounds provisions could be replaced with a provision that only allows employers to refuse requests on the grounds of unjustifiable hardship.

- *Address insecure work* - The ACTU estimates that 4.15 million, or 1 in 3 workers in Australia are in a form of insecure work and the majority of them are women. These workers face far higher health and safety risks, have poorer health, are more likely to be the victims of wage theft, have higher levels of stress, feelings of powerlessness and have very little control over their hours of work. Building on recent reforms, there should be stronger rights for workers employed in casual and gig economy work, stronger protections against sham contracting, and better rights for workers to have secure, stable and predictable rosters. In addition, governments should focus on building the supply of good, flexible, secure jobs for women.

#### Low pay

Another significant barrier to economic participation for women is low pay. This is largely due to the historic undervaluation of work done in female-dominated industries and occupations due to gendered and discriminatory assumptions about the skill level and value of work, and the persistently high levels of occupational and industry segregation along gender lines. Industries and occupations dominated by women are characterised by high levels of award dependency, lower wages and fewer protections. Highly feminised sectors and smaller businesses which predominantly employ women are less likely to be covered by an enterprise agreement and therefore lack the capacity to negotiate improved pay and conditions. Measures to address these challenges include:

- *Address gender based undervaluation of work* – The Government should develop policies that improve the wages, security and safety of care workers, and ensure women receive equal pay in government funded sectors such as aged care , disability care and early childhood education and care by supporting applications in the Fair Work jurisdiction that seek to raise the wages and improve the job quality of workers. As a step to remedying historical undervaluation work in female dominated industries, it should ensure that the outcomes of these cases are fully funded.
- *Establish a living wage* – ensure that minimum and award wages provide at least a living wage, to provide a decent safety net for low paid workers who rely on it.

- *Minimum qualifications in the care and support sectors* – The Government must implement the Aged Care Royal Commission’s recommendation of a Certificate III requirement for personal care workers and ensure the Disability Royal Commission’s recommended national disability worker accreditation scheme incorporates a minimum qualification for disability support workers. Minimum qualifications support workers to achieve higher rates pay of through the Award system, pathways to higher qualifications and raise the status of these female-dominated occupations.
- *Address occupational segregation* - Establish or improve dedicated programs for women to transition into STEM professions and traditionally male-dominated industries and occupations. Address work health and safety barriers for women in male dominated industries such as gendered violence, lack of access to safe, secure, and dedicated facilities for women (such as toilets and changing rooms); and the lack of appropriate, suitable personal protective equipment, tools and clothing.
- *Stronger reporting obligations* - require all organisations with more than 20 employees to report to WGEA on their gender pay gap, including all levels of government and labour hire companies. Strengthen WGEA reporting obligations to include meaningful targets and benchmarks against which to measure progress towards gender equality year on year.

#### Discrimination, harassment and gendered violence

Gender discrimination continues to play a large role in restricting women’s economic participation, including in treating women less favourably when it comes to hiring, access to training, and pay and promotion decisions. Discrimination against pregnant workers and workers with caring responsibilities is rife. Many workers are discriminated against in the course of their employment for reasons related to their reproductive health, which disproportionately affect women and their participation in work, and require changes to working arrangements for reasons relating to their reproductive health, including regular debilitating menstrual or menopause symptoms. Women also continue to face significant health and safety-related barriers to workforce participation, including sexual harassment, sexual, family and domestic violence, and other forms of gendered violence at work, in their homes and in the public realm. Measures to address these challenges include:

- *Address discrimination against workers with caring responsibilities* - Strengthen rights and protections for pregnant workers and working parents and carers; ensure workers can access parental leave entitlements and flexible work arrangements and are not discriminated against when seeking to use those entitlements. For example, paid breastfeeding breaks and appropriate breastfeeding facilities; a positive duty on employers to reasonably accommodate the needs of workers who are pregnant and/or

have family responsibilities; protection for employees taking parental leave through strict liability and/or increased penalties for terminations or adverse action during or shortly after parental leave.

- *Stronger enforcement of the positive duty* - enable workers and unions to make complaints and bring claims regarding non-compliance with the new positive duty in s47C of the Sex Discrimination Act; and provide for independent enforcement of compliance notices in the courts by trade unions and workers where the Australian Human Rights Commission does not do so within a period of time.
- *Address all forms of discrimination and harassment* – Marginalised groups experience higher rates of discrimination and harassment in the workplace, including First Nations people, young adults, people living with disability, the LGBTQIA+ community, migrants and refugees, and people of colour. There should be positive and enforceable legal duties on employers under relevant anti-discrimination laws to eliminate all forms of discrimination and harassment and advance equity. There should also be a broad prohibition of all forms of workplace discrimination and harassment in the Fair Work Act and the FWC should have powers to deal with these matters through access to stop orders and other remedies.
- *Provide workplace protections for reproductive health* – for example the ability to request flexible working arrangements, reasonable adjustments and new forms of leave.
- *Increased education and funding* – For example: education and awareness raising programs run in partnership with union and employer organisations to ensure the effective implementation of recent legislative changes; adequate funding for community organisations to address family and domestic violence and support victims; programs to address gendered violence in all workplaces which apply adult education principles.

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