

Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers

ACCI Submission

18 December 2023



Working for business. Working for Australia.

Telephone 02 6270 8000 | Email info@acci.com.au | Website www.acci.com.au

Media Enquiries

Telephone 02 6270 8020 | Email media@acci.com.au

Canberra Office

Commerce House
Level 3, 24 Brisbane Avenue
Barton ACT 2600
Kingston ACT 2604

Melbourne Office

Level 3, 150 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

Perth Office

Bishops See
Level 5, 235 St Georges Terrace
Perth WA 6000

ABN 85 008 391 795

© Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2023

This work is copyright. No part of this publication may be reproduced or used in any way without acknowledgement to the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Disclaimers & Acknowledgements

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has taken reasonable care in publishing the information contained in this publication but does not guarantee that the information is complete, accurate or current. In particular, ACCI is not responsible for the accuracy of information that has been provided by other parties. The information in this publication is not intended to be used as the basis for making any investment decision and must not be relied upon as investment advice. To the maximum extent permitted by law, ACCI disclaims all liability (including liability in negligence) to any person arising out of use or reliance on the information contained in this publication, including for loss or damage which you or anyone else might suffer as a result of that use or reliance.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Existing supportive programs and services	2
Women's economic equality and barriers to entry	3
The role of VET trainers	3
Targeted cohorts	4
Raising awareness of career possibilities	4
Existing organisations that could provide tailored support	5
Employer supports	5
About ACCI	7

Executive Summary

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 'Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers' discussion paper.

In Australia, there is broad engagement by women in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Over the past three years, female students have shown the highest enrolment rates in government-funded VET courses. Moreover, recent completion rates for government-funded VET courses indicate that females surpass males by 5-7 per cent, emphasising women's recognition of the advantages of pursuing VET-based careers.¹

ACCI has read the discussion paper, noting its focus on helping women achieve higher-paying careers. Female students should be encouraged to undertake a VET course of their preference without stigma attached to their study choice. Careers in the aged care and care economy are as valuable as those in the plumbing and electrical sectors. People choose careers for various reasons, and while economic benefits are one aspect, they are not the sole consideration. Responses to the questions are made through the prism of developing measures that encourage greater participation in male-dominated industries where there are often higher-paying positions.

¹ NCVER, [Historical time series of government-funded vocational education and training from 1981 to 2022](#), July 2023

Existing supportive programs and services

The significance of non-traditional industries in appealing to the broader community cannot be overstated, as highlighted by recent Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) research. JSA's findings reveal that occupations with significant gender imbalances are more susceptible to labour shortages than those with a more balanced gender distribution. Beyond addressing staff shortages, improving gender balance in male-dominated roles, especially within the occupation groups of Machinery Operators and Drivers, Labourers, and Technicians and Trades Workers, also corresponds to higher salaries.

There are a range of existing industry-driven initiatives that seek to encourage higher levels of female participation. Industry involvement is critical in raising awareness of their sectors and developing programs to reach potential female employees. They can assist in promoting VET's benefits within their industry to potential female apprentices, along with providing information on possible career options and opportunities.

The National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA²) is an example of an industry association that has taken an active interest in raising the enrolment levels of female apprentices. NECA provides a female-only pre-apprenticeship program called Women in Power. This provides an opportunity for females who think they may be interested in the electrical trades but are uncertain about committing to a four-year apprenticeship. NECA's successful pre-apprenticeship programs give participants firsthand experience in the industry, aiding them in deciding whether an electrical trade career suits them. These programs equip students with entry-level skills, knowledge, and confidence for apprentice recruitment. NECA offers employment opportunities within its GTO to successful graduates at completion of the course.

Women in Plumbing is a Master Plumbers and Plumbing Apprenticeships Victoria (PAV³) initiative that provides support to female students, apprentices, and plumbers at every step of their journey, including providing paid pre-apprenticeships, direct entry to Plumbing Apprenticeships Victoria (Master Plumbers Group Training Organisation) and an array of networking, mentoring, training, and social opportunities.

In the construction industry, Master Builders Australia runs a Women Building Australia.⁴ program aims to attract and support women to succeed in the building and construction industry. It does this through career expos, a national mentoring program, a dedicated web portal, a business resilience and coaching program, a female-led business register and a harassment and discrimination support line.

The Housing Industry Association has a program called Building Women, which operates nationally and offers training and apprentice programs with wrap-around mentoring to support young women entering the industry.

Industry associations are essential when considering programs to raise awareness of the potential VET industries to female participants. Industry-led programs will provide the best outcomes assisted by government funding, which will help to ensure they have greater reach into the wider community.

Apprenticeship Support Australia is a service provider that provides support to prospective and current employers and Australian apprentices. It has established multiple programs to support women, including a free mentoring program, Women Trading Up⁵ which provides access to specialised mentoring and support. There are peer networking groups, partnerships with SALT, the National Association of Women

² NECA, [Women in power](#)

³ Master Plumber, [Women in plumbing](#)

⁴ Women Building Australia, [Advancing women in building and construction](#)

⁵ Apprenticeship support network, [Women Trading Up](#), 2023

in Construction and Empowered Women in Trade to increase role model visibility and practical 'on the tools' sessions, and mentors with lived experience to support complex issues for female apprentices.

Women's economic equality and barriers to entry

Several initiatives could be implemented to drive greater inclusivity of females from differing backgrounds and circumstances.

Here are some examples of initiatives to support greater female participation:

- Flexible learning options- the possibility of part-time apprenticeships.
- Providing guidance and mentorship to navigate their career paths, emphasising the opportunities available in various industries.
- Additional childcare support options including earlier opening times.
- Better recognition of prior learning.
- Re-entry programs and skill refresher courses can aid women returning from a career break.
- Advanced training programs or short courses can help women enhance their qualifications, enabling career progression or diversification.
- Accessible learning environments, accommodations, and specialised support.
- Access to mental health support services, particularly for women making a career change.

The role of VET trainers

Access to quality industry practitioners is essential to a female student's VET education journey. In male-dominated VET courses, trainers tend to be male, so there may be a need for guidance to practice concerning gender diversity. Female VET trainers also play a pivotal role in creating an inclusive learning environment, providing advice, inspiration, and support for female students pursuing careers in male-dominated industries. Their presence contributes significantly to breaking down barriers and empowering the next generation of women in these courses.

A program to encourage more females to become trainers creates a more representative environment and helps empower and provide confidence to students. The timeframe to undertake Certificate IV in training and assessment can be four to six months, and the course cost is approximately \$4,000. This is a lengthy time requirement for people already working full-time, often with childcare requirements and costly. There may be a more straightforward method than the current Certificate IV in training and assessment for these experienced practitioners, or whether skill sets are sufficient within a provider workforce where others fully trained in delivery and assessment are available.

The qualification needs to feel relevant to those experienced practitioners. At present, the compulsory need to undertake the full qualification is a barrier to entry, particularly for those who remain in full or part-time employment in industry. A closer analysis of industry-based trainers with shorter entry requirements is needed to attract and retain this vital resource. The Certificate IV is not the only mechanism to assure quality.

Targeted cohorts

Given the relatively low enrolment of females in VET courses for qualifications in many male-dominated industries, ACCI believes there should be a female-centred approach. Recognising the substantial gender disparity across many sectors, it is evident that a comprehensive strategy is imperative rather than narrowly targeting specific groups of women. For instance, 101 out of 30,168 qualified plumbers are women in Victoria.⁶, highlighting the need to encourage more women overall.

We are aware of the Australian Skills Guarantee procurement policy which will require a set amount of female apprentices or trainees on construction or ICT projects. We believe that trade industries as a whole are more widely accessible than individual projects and recommend policies that encourage participation across Australia.

Raising awareness of career possibilities

Various approaches could be undertaken to raise awareness of the potential career opportunities in VET for females in secondary school and those already in the workforce.

At secondary school, one of the primary sources of career information for students are career counsellors who provide guidance, career planning and personalised advice on potential career paths. In 2021, the Productivity Commission found that schools and their advisers often have little experience with VET and consequently favour universities.⁷ It would be understandable they would have a low knowledge of non-traditional career pathways for interested female students.

There needs to be greater engagement with VET providers with the development of an education program to assist career counsellors. It should become mandatory that secondary schools host one interaction with a VET provider and student cohort for each year between years 8-11, with four in total.

The Grattan Institute has found that students who undertake VET in construction, engineering and commerce will more likely achieve higher incomes than many low-ATAR university graduates⁸. Information such as this needs to be promoted at high schools to ensure that female students are presented with various options when choosing their career paths.

Empowering females in VET requires multifaceted approaches. Utilising platforms like career days with VET prominently featured, tailored industry awareness campaigns in secondary schools, and personalised career paths for interested female students can widen their perspectives. Providing clear insights into training requirements and post-study career opportunities fosters informed decision-making among students.

There is room for greater engagement with existing female workers to encourage them to undertake and complete a VET qualification. An overarching strategy should showcase male-dominated industries as a viable education pathway. Any promotional campaign for VET should reflect that it is much more than a training pathway for high school students, with a targeted campaign for mature student audiences needed.

An overarching strategy, led by the federal government, could be greater awareness raising of the opportunities for prospective female students, highlighting real women working in these areas, much like previous Defence Careers campaigns⁹. Any marketing campaign must use various media like print, TV,

⁶ The Age, [The pipes, the pipes are calling ... for aspiring women plumbers](#), 2021

⁷ Productivity Commission Study Report, [National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development Review](#), 2019

⁸ Grattan Institute, [Risks and rewards: when is vocational education a good alternative to higher education](#), 2019

⁹ Defence, [Live a Story Worth Telling](#), 2023

radio and social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram. They should also be available in multiple languages to reflect our multicultural population.

The combination of good career advice with positive images and stories of females undertaking successful careers in male-dominated industries will positively impact potential students.

Existing organisations that could provide tailored support

A key component in connecting women with apprenticeship or traineeship is the role of the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network Providers (AASNs). Expanding the support services offered by the AASNs will aid the journey of the female apprentice or trainee.

The AASNs could provide female-centric additional support measures to employers and apprentices. It is essential that employers, particularly small businesses, are supplied with easy-to-follow best practice guides covering topics their female employees may be unwilling to raise with them. ACCI also supports further training to develop guidance for strongly gender-polarised workplaces to help eliminate the risk of discriminatory or unhealthy workplace cultures.

The AASNs could deliver wrap-around mentoring services for both the female apprentice and the employer. To properly provide this service, the AASNs require adequate funding to have these supports.

Group training organisations (GTOs) are another option to support more females throughout their VET courses. GTOs employ apprentices and trainees and then place them with host employers for on-the-job training, creating a supportive learning and skill development structure. GTOs can actively match female students with host employers, providing them with opportunities in industries traditionally dominated by males. This exposure helps females gain practical experience and confidence in these fields. GTOs often have a framework that allows for more adaptable training schedules, accommodating the needs of female students who might have additional responsibilities or commitments. GTOs can collaborate with host employers to tailor training programs that suit the needs and preferences of female students, allowing for a more personalised learning experience.

GTOs operate with a mix of federal and state funding, but this needs to be more consistent across jurisdictions. ACCI submits that better funding of group training and more consistency of funding nationally, especially those targeted at completion and pastoral care outcomes for females, would assist the government in achieving its desired results.

Employer supports

Employers should be encouraged to develop new initiatives to broaden their workforce.

Developing flexible work arrangements would provide greater potential employee outcomes and aid employee retention. Employers require assistance implementing part-time roles, adjusting working hours, job sharing, and compressed work schedules. Access to resources and guidance on managing these arrangements is essential for their successful establishment.

Promoting upskilling policies targeting women is crucial. This entails encouraging and financially supporting women in their pursuit of training and education. Study leave, career development programs, and financial aid are vital in empowering women through upskilling opportunities.

Providing resources that raise awareness about inclusivity in learning environments is crucial. Workshops, seminars, or consultancy services can aid in integrating inclusivity into training practices, ensuring a supportive and empowering learning environment for all.

Moreover, offering financial support, scholarships, or subsidies for VET training encourages female participation and access to educational opportunities. Building employer capacity, mentoring programs, peer support groups, and external support are essential. Additionally, addressing issues through bystander education, more comprehensive education on diversity, and creating safe complaint mechanisms are integral steps in fostering a more inclusive workplace.

About ACCI

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry represents hundreds of thousands of businesses in every state and territory and across all industries. Ranging from small and medium enterprises to the largest companies, our network employs millions of people.

ACCI strives to make Australia the best place in the world to do business – so that Australians have the jobs, living standards and opportunities to which they aspire.

We seek to create an environment in which businesspeople, employees and independent contractors can achieve their potential as part of a dynamic private sector. We encourage entrepreneurship and innovation to achieve prosperity, economic growth, and jobs.

We focus on issues that impact on business, including economics, trade, workplace relations, work health and safety, and employment, education, and training.

We advocate for Australian business in public debate and to policy decision-makers, including ministers, shadow ministers, other members of parliament, ministerial policy advisors, public servants, regulators and other national agencies. We represent Australian business in international forums.

We represent the broad interests of the private sector rather than individual clients or a narrow sectional interest.

ACCI Members

State and Territory Chambers



Industry Associations





**Australian
Chamber of Commerce
and Industry**