



ASU Submission

Australian Government
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers

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The ASU

The Australian Services Union ('ASU') is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 135,000 members. ASU members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations in both the private, public and community sectors.

We are the largest local government union in Australia with our local government members represented by State based ASU Branches throughout the country. Our members jobs are varied and include work in administration, childcare, garbage collection and recycling, garden maintenance, home care and road work and as Engineers, Librarians and Truck Drivers.

The ASU is also Australia's largest union in the energy/electricity industry with our members working in a variety of classifications across electricity generation, distribution, retail and transmission.

Executive Summary

Vocational Education and Training (VET) can be a powerful tool for women's empowerment, fostering economic independence, dismantling gender barriers, and contributing to a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

Through diverse course offerings, VET can encourage women to enter fields where they are underrepresented, fostering diversity and challenging societal norms. However, there is a need to recognise why women don't always view VET as an option for them and understand more deeply why women aren't applying or dropping out when they do.

We welcome the recent development of the five-year National Skills Agreement to expand and transform VET, including a focus on gender equality and women's economic participation. Supporting women to achieve higher-paying careers through VET pathways involves a comprehensive approach that addresses various challenges and barriers.

We believe government should target women in both Energy and Local Government to ensure VET programs lead to well-paying jobs that creates a more inclusive and equitable environment across multiple industries and occupations.

Women in Local Government

The number of women in senior positions in local government is disproportionately small compared to the overall number of women in the workforce and the general population.¹ Women in local government are overwhelmingly concentrated at the bottom end of the pay scale, often in part time jobs and largely in the clerical and administrative areas.

Local government must be truly representative and inclusive for women. Women need to be employed across all classifications, including in senior management and leadership. A recent ALGA report demonstrated there is a higher proportion of women working part-time (82%) and in casual positions (67%) despite the local government workforce being 52.3% female.²

¹ Victorian Government, Gender equity in local government [online] <https://www.agec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2018-08-Ruth-McGowan-Gender-Equity-in-Local-Government-Research-Companion.pdf>

² Australian Local Government Associate, 2022 Local Government Workforce Skills and Capability Survey [online] <https://alga.com.au/workforce-survey-reinforces-major-jobs-and-skills-challenge/>

With the right training, investment in skills, and career paths women in lower-level classifications can be trained to become skilled professionals to meet skills shortages in civil engineers and building surveyors and improve the representation of women in those non-traditional professions. With the right mix of family friendly conditions and training women can also be promoted to senior management and leadership positions.

Access to VET enables women to enhance their qualifications and acquire specialised knowledge, facilitating career advancement within the local government sector. It opens opportunities for leadership roles, allowing women to contribute to decision-making processes as well as addressing the gender disparities in various professions within local government.

Women in Energy

VET is crucial for women in the energy industry as historically the energy industry has been male dominated. VET can help address gender imbalances by equipping women with the skills and confidence needed to enter and thrive in these traditionally male-centric roles.

The energy industry has a growing demand for skilled workers. VET programs help ensure that there is a steady supply of well-trained professionals, including women, to meet the industry's workforce needs, especially with the shift to sustainable and renewable energy with environmentally friendly practices.

Well-paying jobs in the energy industry can contribute to closing the gender pay gap. As women gain skills and qualifications, they become more competitive in the job market and are better positioned to negotiate equitable compensation.

By acquiring industry-specific skills through VET, women can enhance their career prospects and open doors to higher-paying and more senior roles within the energy sector.

Initiatives that support women

Encouraging women to pursue VET contributes to greater diversity and inclusion. A diverse workforce brings different perspectives, ideas, and approaches, fostering innovation and problem-solving. VET programs that lead to well-paying jobs for women will contribute to closing the gender pay gap.

We propose the following initiatives and supports to assist women to achieve higher-paying careers via VET pathways.

Local Government: Develop targeted training programs specifically designed to upskill women in lower-level classifications for roles in civil engineering, building surveying, and other non-traditional professions within local government.

Champion female role models: There is a need to champion female role models and showcase different career pathways by developing a clear transition pathway from secondary education, to VET and finally to full time secure employment.

Flexibility at VET: There is a need for more flexibility around course attendance (e.g. part-time/online) and start/finish times, both while studying and in the workplace. After course completion we need to enforce the provision of flexibility conditions that exist in EBAs and Awards (e.g. job share, compressed hours) and change the workplace culture around accessing those conditions. The problem is not that conditions are not 'available', but often workplace culture is such

that women do not feel they can or are not allowed to access the conditions, especially those working in a non-traditional occupation.

Inclusive, safe, and fair workplaces: There is a need to create inclusive, safe and fair workplaces for women. This involves facilities for women in the workplace (e.g. change rooms and toilets) as well as ensuring there is zero tolerance for workplace harassment (including gendered violence and sexual harassment), and that workplaces are family-friendly with initiatives such as job sharing, flexible work arrangements and workplace practices that accommodate caring responsibilities which are accessible to all workers, with all workers encouraged to use these provisions.

Financial supports: Ensure financial supports and incentives for women in trades are genuinely at the scale required to generate transformational change in the workforce's composition and culture. Provide financial support for the costs associated with training (e.g. tools). There is also a need to address the low wages for apprentices, particularly for mature-age women who are already in the workforce but are contemplating a career change via VET.

Mentorship Programs: Establish mentorship initiatives connecting women with successful professionals in their chosen fields. This guidance can help navigate career choices, set goals, and build professional networks.

Childcare Support: Provide on-site childcare facilities or subsidies to make it easier for mothers to pursue VET programs without the added stress of childcare arrangements.

Industry Partnerships: Forge strong partnerships with employers to ensure that VET programs align with industry needs, increasing the likelihood of women securing well-paying jobs upon completion.

Career Counselling: Provide specialised career counselling services that consider the unique challenges women may face, guiding them towards high-paying career options aligned with their skills and interests.

Networking Opportunities: Facilitate networking events and industry interactions to help women build professional connections, access job opportunities, and gain insights into potential career paths.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Develop RPL programs, allowing women to receive credit for skills acquired through work or life experiences, expediting their progress through VET courses.

Highlight Business Benefits: Highlight compelling business cases, showcasing how a diverse workforce, including skilled women, contributes to increased creativity, problem-solving, and overall business success.

Government Grants and Subsidies: Inform employers about available government grants and subsidies for upskilling initiatives.

Peer Mentoring: Facilitate peer mentoring programs where women who have undergone upskilling through VET can share their experiences and insights.

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs): It is essential that the RTOs registered to deliver qualifications do so to the highest standards possible. Opportunistic behaviour by private, for-profit providers has contributed to exploitation of vulnerable groups of workers.

CALD Learners: Initiatives to address the needs of women CALD learners to facilitate successful engagement with learning. Support could include tailored services to the individual's specific learning needs, such as extra literacy and numeracy support.

Address Stereotypes and Perceptions: Conduct awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and change perceptions about women's roles. Highlight success stories of women who have excelled in traditionally male-dominated roles.

Scholarships: More funding for scholarships in VET courses that support women to accelerate their career potential.

Conclusion

Improving VET participation is an important strategy for improving life and work opportunities for women. VET is a stepping stone for many into further education, training and work, and is an essential tool for gender equality. By implementing multifaceted initiatives and support systems, Government can empower women to overcome barriers and successfully pursue higher-paying careers through VET pathways.