Building a Better VET Workforce for Women

Submission to Jobs and Skills Australia

December 2025

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Acknowledgement

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future.

We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities.

We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

About WwWA

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) represents two key portfolios: National Women's Safety (NWS) and National Women's Equality (NWE).

The WwWA connects the critical areas of gender-based violence prevention and the advancement of women's economic equality and leadership, bridging these important policy fields for greater impact.

We work with members and stakeholders, including the Australian Government, to provide expertise and advice on gender equality and women's safety.

Executive Summary

The Working with Women Alliance (WwWA) are grateful for the opportunity to consult on Jobs and Skills Australia's (JSA) discussion paper on *Building a better understanding of the VET workforce*. We commend JSA's efforts to operationalise the VET workforce Blueprint National Actions, and acknowledge JSA's *Gender Economic Equality Study* as a progressive step in understanding gender norms within the VET workforce and Australia's labour market more broadly. WwWA endorses proposals to strengthen the understanding of the VET workforce through occupational mapping, an improved data strategy and an ongoing research program. We emphasise that data capture initiatives must be designed to understand gender and cultural norms in the VET workforce, and to identify intervention points to address gender inequality and occupational segregation.

The VET workforce is increasingly critical to the future of Australia's labour market. Approximately a quarter of the working-age population are enrolled in VET with an Australian provider.[1] The number of high school students participating in VET increased by nearly 6% between 2023 and 2024, with the highest rates of participation since establishment.[2] Simultaneously, reliance on VET-trained industries such as social services and healthcare is growing with Australia's ageing population.

VET learning outcomes are gendered, and stratified along racial, ethnic, cultural lines, as well as in relation to disability. The segregation and gender concentration of the VET workforce itself is a significant contributor to this problem. While aggregate data suggests gender balance or female-domination within the VET workforce, men and women are concentrated in particular jobs and areas of study, perpetuating and reproducing gender segregation throughout the broader Australian workforce. Of the 20 most common VET-related occupations, only four had a lower rate of gender segregation than their aligned workforce. Of the 14 VET qualifications where women are typically paid more highly than men, only three occupations had an average salary above the national median income of $48,500 (for one-year post-training).[3]

This submission will highlight how gender inequality in the VET workforce is reinforcing occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination in Australia's industries. Not only does this have a disproportionate impact on women's safety and economic outcomes, but it is consequential for the sustainability of Australia's labour force and the prosperity of the economy.

Diversity in VET Outcomes

In addition to entrenched gender norms in VET industries, discrimination based on race, culture, ethnicity, and disability also steer students towards certain occupations and training outcomes. Women have poorer economic outcomes across the top 100 VET qualifications, and this is compounded for First Nations women, multicultural women, and people with disability. From the limited data on the demography of the VET workforce, we know:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People

- Less Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people work in the VET sector than in the wider Australian workforce.[4]
- First Nations people are more likely to work in gender-segregated workplaces.[5]
  - First Nations employees' economic outcomes are typically better in gender segregated occupations.[6]
- First Nations women have better economic outcomes in training pathways that lead to gender-balanced and female dominated occupations.[7]
  - However, are more likely than non-Indigenous women to work in male-dominated occupations.[8]
- First Nations employees are more concentrated in community services.[9]

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse People

- Less multicultural Australians work in the VET workforce than in the wider Australian workforce.[10]
- Multicultural women graduated from VET courses experience weaker economic outcomes post training, comparative to non-VET occupations.[11]
- Multicultural workers are highly concentrated in information communications and technology, healthcare, transportation, and hospitality occupations.[12]
- Multicultural workers are underrepresented in teaching and male-dominated trades.[13]
- Multicultural workers are increasingly employed in female-dominated occupations that are growing – healthcare and community services. This tells us multicultural people are playing a major role in meeting labour demand.[14]
- Multicultural women are increasingly enrolling in information technology courses, effecting change towards a more gender-balanced workforce.[15]

People with Disabilities

- People with disability have the lowest economic and employment outcomes post training.[16]

- People with disability are more likely to hold a certificate III/IV and much less likely to hold a Bachelor degree or above than the general population. This indicates a high reliance on VET for educational attainment.[17]
- Women with disability have good employment outcomes in care qualifications.[18]
- Students with disability face significant barriers in accessing VET pathways to information technology, community services, and sports qualifications.[19]

Diversity in the VET workforce is essential to optimising Australia's labour force and economy. Collecting data that is disaggregated by demography is essential to recognising opportunities to address gender and cultural norms that disadvantage diverse communities, and strain productivity and economic growth.

Perpetuating Norms in the VET Workforce

VET Sector and Gender Inequality

Despite growing VET enrolments, the sector continues to struggle with completion and retention rates: Between 2024 and 2025, completion rates rose by less than 2% from 47.5%.[20] For Indigenous learners the average completion rate is significantly lower[21], and for learners with disability the completion rate is actively reducing.[22] In line with VET enrolments and increasing demand, the healthcare sector is growing exponentially, expected to host 2.21 million employees by 2026.[23] However, the majority of healthcare occupations are in a shortage, facing high rates of burnout and turnover.[24] The frequency of work health and safety claims associated with mental stress in the healthcare and social assistance workforce is double that of other industries.[25]

JSA's second Gender Economic Equality Study, *Education and training divides – Gendered skills, pathways and outcomes*,[26] confirms that the VET sector reproduces deeply entrenched gender inequality. This is observed through occupational segregation, workplace gender-based violence, gender pay-gaps, and the undervaluation of feminised work. Only 21% of Australia's workforce is gender-balanced, and 70% have the same degree of occupational segregation as in 2006.[27] More than half the female workforce are employed in only three industries: Healthcare and Social Assistance, Retail Trade, and Education and Training.[28] Gender-segregated industries are more likely to be in shortage: 73% of almost completely male dominated occupations are considered in shortage, along with 47% of almost completely female dominated roles.

Though the total number of enrolments in VET is shared equally by male and female students, gender division begins from the time students select their field of education: women make up more than 80% of enrolments in community services and healthcare,

and only 7% in construction enrolments, 19% in manufacturing, and 24% in information and communications technology.[29] As identified by JSA, occupational segregation and labour shortages in these industries will impact key reform areas such as the Net Zero transformation, the digital transformation, and improvement in the care sector. Of the 5.1 million VET student enrolled in 2023, women accounted for 17% of STEM students and only 12% of engineering and related technologies, one of the fastest growing sectors.[30]

Existing VET Workforce Data

These gender and cultural norms are embedded from the top down. In total, the VET workforce is estimated to be only slightly more feminised and slightly less culturally diverse than the wider Australian workforce.[31] However, this does not reflect the significant gendered trends within segments of the VET workforce. From the limited data available, we know:

- There remains a 16% gender pay gap in the VET workforce, with women earning $14,773 less than their male colleagues on average.[32]
- In female-dominated VET fields such as nursing, early childhood education and community services, women represent the majority of teaching staff.[33]
- In male-dominated VET fields such as construction and trades, information communications and technology, men represent the majority of teaching staff.[34]
- There is a significant underrepresentation of cultural diversity in the teaching segment.[35]
- The learning support segment is comprised of more than 75% women.[36]
- The quality assurance and compliance segment is comprised of more than 70% women. [37]
- Nearly 70% of part-time VET employees are women.[38]

JSA's Gender Economic Equality Study indicates that VET training pipelines are currently unlikely to improve occupational segregation. The study identifies drivers of occupational segregation, including:[39]

- Low visibility and representation of men and women in female-dominated and male-dominated fields, respectively.
- Cultural environments and behaviours that impact students.
- Gender pay gaps, sexual discrimination, and barriers to career advancement.

Data collection must be designed around measuring and monitoring these barriers in the VET workforce to ensure the sector can implement meaningful solutions to address gender inequality and occupational segregation.

Additional Data Collection Considerations

In addition to this, the WwWA membership have pointed to specific challenges for female employees of the VET workforce. These too, should be considered when designing data collection initiatives that will capture drivers of occupational segregation and gender inequality.

A significant portion of the VET training and assessment course to become a teacher is spent learning about compliance. Teachers are required to complete arduous skills matrices where they map their direct qualifications against teaching requirements. VET teaching staff are also required to maintain currency, meaning that they must work in industry whilst teaching, dividing their time throughout the week. This requirement is complicated by inconsistent requirements across training providers, meaning it is not clear how enforceable currency maintenance is.

To support the teaching segment of the VET workforce, industry professionals are encouraged to complete their teaching and assessment accreditation and may begin teaching whilst studying. WwWA members of the VET teaching segment estimate that studying teachers are expected to complete one day of unpaid study a week for 12 months to complete their qualification. This further divides teachers' time and disincentivises industry professionals to move to the VET teaching segment. This income disincentive disproportionately impacts women who are on lower incomes and often have substantive unpaid care responsibilities and cannot afford an unpaid study day.

Teachers must split their time teaching, maintaining currency, lesson planning, studying and compliance reporting. VET teachers rely on each other for lesson plans and access to resources, often receiving little support from training providers, and no support regarding compliance reporting. Many training organisations do not proactively support their staff in managing these competing priorities. Comparative to primary and secondary schools, and universities, the VET workforce receives little support with resources and cultural competency training. This lack of support for VET teacher disproportionately impacts women who already divide their time between work and caring responsibilities.

Recommendations

Jobs and Skills Australia must consider the data and recommendations of the Gender Equality Study as they approach mapping and improving the VET workforce. It is not enough to consider the makeup, transparency and diversity of the VET workforce, JSA must also consider the impact of the workforce on student outcomes and the segregation of the broader Australian workforce.

1. Occupational Mapping

1.1 Accreditation Guide: In addition to the proposed resources to support occupational mapping, WwWA encourage JSA to consider inclusion of an 'accreditation guide' that would outline the VET workforce accreditation process and requirements. This would support incoming teaching staff, students and policymakers in understanding requirements such as maintaining currency and compliance reporting.

2. Data Strategy

2.1 Gendered Survey Design: Ensure that data-capture methods have a gendered lens that will capture gender-specific issues such as drivers of occupational segregation and gender-based discrimination.

2.2 Intersectional Survey Design: Ensure that data-capture methods have an intersectional lens that will capture specific access barriers for diverse communities.

3. Research Program

3.1 Strengths Focus: Establish as a research priority the attraction and retention of gender-balanced workforce into gender-segregated occupations.

3.2 Increase funding and grants for students in non-gender-balanced fields of study.

3.3 Support for Teaching Staff: Account for how much time teachers spend on maintaining currency, lesson planning, studying and compliance reporting. Design systems that properly value and remunerate this labour and support teachers.

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