



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Employment  
and Workplace Relations**

# Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers

## Discussion Paper



November 2023

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The document must be attributed as the Australian Government Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers Discussion Paper.

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## Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (the department) acknowledges the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia on which we gather, live, work and stand. We acknowledge all traditional custodians, their Elders past and present, and we pay our respects to their continuing connection to their culture, community, land, sea and water.

## Have your say

Public consultation is an opportunity to work together on options to inform **initiatives that support women to achieve higher-paying careers via vocational education and training (VET) pathways**. This discussion paper reflects the department's preliminary views and is not Government policy.

This discussion paper contains questions and information to provide context and help you frame your thoughts and feedback. Responses to this discussion paper will help the department understand what is important for the design and implementation of initiatives. All perspectives and comments are welcome.

## Key dates

- Discussion paper released on 13 November 2023
- Consultation throughout November and December 2023
- Closing date for written submissions is 5pm AEDT, 18 December 2023.

## How to make a submission

The department welcomes written feedback on this discussion paper from interested parties by 5pm AEDT, 18 December 2023. The discussion paper includes information and questions to guide your response. You may also wish to respond to the discussion paper more generally.

Please provide feedback by uploading a document via <https://consultations.dewr.gov.au/>.

Before you submit your response to a consultation, the department will ask you to review and accept a Privacy Collection Statement. You will have the option to keep your response confidential.

## Key contacts

General enquiries can be made to the department via the following (electronic correspondence is preferred):

Method	Details
Email:	<a href="mailto:wiv@dewr.gov.au">wiv@dewr.gov.au</a>
Post:	Women in VET team Department of Employment and Workplace Relations Location Code: C50MA6 GPO Box 9828, Canberra ACT 2601

## Introduction

The Australian Government has made it clear that women's equality is essential for strengthening our economy, our society and our nation. It has committed to advancing gender equality as a national priority and placed this at the centre of much of the Government's work. The Australian Government cannot tackle this issue alone, it needs assistance from other levels of government, employers, business, unions, communities and individuals, as well as education and training providers to support lasting cultural change.

The department is consulting with a range of stakeholders to guide policy and program design to address systemic barriers for women in VET.

## We want to hear from you

The department is engaging stakeholders across the community in a conversation about the **supports that are required to assist women to achieve higher-paying careers via VET pathways**.

In late 2022, the department engaged with stakeholders to understand what is most effective in attracting and retaining women in VET-based occupations with low levels of women's participation. The time and insights of stakeholders has already helped to inform settings for the Australian Skills Guarantee and increased support for women in apprenticeships and traineeships. It has also informed the development of the National Skills Agreement and Fee-Free TAFE. We are keen to build on this advice.

This phase of consultation is designed to gather views on what further work can be undertaken to assist women to achieve higher-paying careers via VET pathways. It will inform the design of future skills and training initiatives to support women's economic equality. Consultations will focus on good policy and program design, how tailored assistance could be provided to specific cohorts of women in VET, and how to develop more supportive training environments, inclusive workplaces and flexible work arrangements to better support women. It may also inform the development of a National Skills Plan on national priorities, including gender equality, agreed in the National Skills Agreement.

The consultation findings will be used to inform other opportunities to improve women's participation across Government and will be shared with other interested departments and agencies. A range of questions have been developed to guide your feedback. The questions fall into three main areas:

► **Design of initiatives** addresses the essential elements of good policy and program design, including what the initiatives could involve and the cohorts of women that initiatives could target. There is also the opportunity to direct initiatives to specific industries and sectors to ensure women are well-placed to take advantage of high-demand, high-growth, emerging and transitioning industries. Additionally, evaluation is a key tool to examine the performance of initiatives, assess whether they are meeting intended outcomes and guide future decisions.

► **Use of tailored support** is considered key to supporting women to participate and succeed in VET. It recognises that different cohorts of women require different approaches and assistance, and may require assistance to overcome multiple intersecting barriers, including both vocational and non-vocational support. Key elements of tailored support we want feedback on include the mechanism/s and type/s of provider/s that could be used to provide such assistance.

► **Inclusive VET environments and workplaces** focusses on the types of services, supports and culture that education and training providers and employers have in place to, not only attract and retain women, but support them to thrive and progress their careers. This could relate to provision of child care services on or near campus or work, use of flexible working arrangements and training opportunities to support women to increase their workforce participation, and workplace policies and programs to support inclusivity and equality.

## Questions to guide your feedback

### Design of initiatives

No.	Question
1	<p><b>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?</b></p>
2	<p><b>How can we ensure initiatives address key concerns regarding women’s economic equality and support Australia’s productivity?</b></p> <p> Matters to consider in your feedback could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current and predicted skills shortages</li> <li>• The gender pay gap</li> <li>• Industry and occupational gender segregation and the gendered nature of VET pathway choices</li> <li>• Safe and supportive workplaces and secure careers for women</li> <li>• Opportunities to reskill to re-enter the labour market after a career break.</li> </ul>
3	<p><b>What cohorts of women should VET initiatives specifically target?</b></p> <p> Examples could include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Nations women</li> <li>• Women who are single parents</li> <li>• Women with a disability</li> <li>• Women employed in low skill and/or low pay occupations</li> <li>• Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women</li> <li>• Women in trades apprenticeships and traineeships</li> <li>• Young women</li> <li>• Mature-aged women</li> <li>• Women returning from a career break</li> <li>• Women who have experienced/are experiencing domestic and family violence</li> <li>• Women who are unemployed and/or receiving income support payments</li> <li>• Women looking to upskill an existing qualification.</li> </ul>
4	<p><b>What other areas could initiatives target?</b></p> <p> Some of the things initiatives could target include, but are not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industries/sectors/occupations, for example:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emerging or transitioning sectors, such as new energy</li> <li>▪ Highly gender segregated occupations</li> <li>▪ Priority list skills and occupations, such as care.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Geographical locations, for example:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Locations of high disadvantage</li> <li>▪ Regional and remote areas</li> <li>▪ Areas with an existing labour market.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Types of employers, for example:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Employers with a large geographical footprint</li> <li>▪ Medium and large employers (&gt;20 employees)</li> <li>▪ Group Training Organisations (GTOs)</li> <li>▪ Employers with an existing commitment to workplace inclusivity and diversity.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
5	<p><b>How should we evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives?</b></p> <p> Your considerations may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How we take initiatives to scale, measure impacts and share learnings</li> <li>• The kinds of information and data we need to collect.</li> </ul>

## Use of tailored support

No.	Question
6	<p><b>What kinds of vocational and non-vocational assistance do women need to successfully undertake and achieve a VET qualification?</b></p> <p> Matters to consider in your feedback could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers women face in taking up and completing-apprenticeships and traineeships</li> <li>• Needs of women in different industries/sectors/occupations, particularly those with gender segregated workforces</li> <li>• Types of incentives and supports that would encourage and support women’s successful participation in VET, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Employer policies and programs that support women to: upskill; successfully return to work after a career break; use flexible work arrangements</li> <li>▪ Opportunities for workplace and occupational mentoring to provide professional guidance, improve confidence and support improved outcomes</li> <li>▪ Peer support services to enable women to share experiences to help one another.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
7	<p><b>Are there existing organisations that could assist women in VET with vocational and non-vocational barriers?</b></p> <p> Examples could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of a group training organisation type provider model to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Support key cohorts of women participating in VET</li> <li>▪ Facilitate an industry led and/or place-based approach to supports women to achieve a VET-based career</li> <li>▪ Identify, tailor and co-ordinate vocational and non-vocational assistance to support women to participate in VET.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• The opportunity for specialist organisations and individuals to provide targeted assistance to support women to participate in VET, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ community-based social assistance organisations.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Inclusive VET environments and workplaces

No.	Question
8	<p><b>What sorts of services and support do TAFE and training providers offer to assist students, particularly women, to participate in VET? What services have proven most effective? What other services and supports could be provided?</b></p> <p> Some examples of the services we know are being provided include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careers advice and connection to employment pathways</li> <li>• Affordable and accessible on-campus and/or TAFE operated child care services</li> <li>• Transport in locations where public transport is infrequent or unreliable.</li> </ul>
9	<p><b>How can we encourage and support more employers and training providers to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Achieve more diverse workforces</b></li> <li>• <b>Create culturally safe and inclusive workplaces</b></li> <li>• <b>Remove barriers to women and carers who want to work and/or upskill</b></li> <li>• <b>Implement more flexible work arrangements</b></li> <li>• <b>Embed inclusivity into learning environments.</b></li> </ul> <p><b>What kind/s of assistance do employers need to actively support these types of initiatives?</b></p> <p> Matters to consider in your feedback could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of and access to flexible work arrangements for employees, for example: part-time work; changed start and finish times; job sharing; compressed work hours</li> <li>• Employer policies and processes to support and encourage women to upskill</li> <li>• The types of support employers require in order to trial, implement and improve flexible and inclusive work arrangements.</li> </ul>
10	<p><b>How can we assist and encourage employers to support women to upskill through VET qualifications?</b></p> <p> Your considerations may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employers' use of VET to enhance the performance and expand knowledge of their workforce</li> <li>• Employer initiatives that advance women along their chosen career path</li> <li>• VET settings that would encourage employers to provide access to VET training.</li> </ul>

## Context

### Women's economic equality

In September 2022, the Jobs and Skills Summit (the Summit) brought a diverse range of Australians together to work constructively on the challenges and opportunities facing the Australian labour market and economy. It laid out national priorities for further work and future action, including the need to embed women's economic participation and equality as a key economic imperative.

Released on 23 October 2023, the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) Report (available at <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>) acknowledges the restrictions and impacts of pervasive and systematic gender inequality on Australia's full social and economic potential. It identifies five economic pillars where gendered economic inequality is notably prevalent: Care; Work; Education and Skills; Tax and Transfers; and Government. The WEET Report recommends that the Australian Government: provide women with lifelong, accessible, flexible and affordable education and skill building; and remove existing disincentives and inequities that perpetuate industry and occupational segregation and sustained gendered pay and wealth gaps.

Over their lifetimes, women are more likely to earn less than men, are less likely to advance as far in their careers as men and tend to accumulate less superannuation than men. On average, women also tend to retire earlier than men. The cumulative effect of these factors can have negative impacts later in life, particularly for women who go through a relationship breakdown or divorce. Single mothers can face acute challenges in relation to workforce participation and financial security that can have significant impacts for their lifetime earnings and retirement income. Additionally, migrants who are women tend to have weaker economic outcomes than those who are men, and the gender gap in labour force participation is also higher amongst migrants when compared with the general Australian population<sup>1</sup>.

The Summit was just the beginning of the Government's conversation about women's economic participation, through focusing on opportunities to improve women's economic equality and security. This conversation continues.

The *2023 Intergenerational Report 2023: Australia's Future to 2063* (available at <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/p2023-435150.pdf>) predicts shifts in Australia's economy and outlines risks to Australia's future prosperity and resilience. It recognises that responsive skills and training systems are important to growing and transforming our workforce to address future challenges and maximise our opportunities. The Report maintains that increases in labour force participation over the past 40 years have largely been driven by women, with women's labour force participation at a record high. The economy has shifted to be more services-oriented and employment arrangements have become more varied. Combined with changes in legislation and social attitudes, this has encouraged more women to enter skilled professions. Notwithstanding this, the Report notes that the experiences of women are varied: many women continue to face barriers to finding jobs or working their preferred hours; and many industries and occupations have persistent gender skews.

Building on the outcomes of the Summit, *Working Future* (available at <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/p2023-447996-working-future.pdf>) is the Australian Government's white paper on jobs and opportunities. It highlights the need for a dynamic and inclusive labour market to support secure, well-paid jobs in which employees, employers and communities can thrive. It finds that across all of Australia's structural economic challenges – care services, net zero transition, digital, sovereign

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Budget Statement, 2022-23 ([https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2022-23.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2022-23.pdf))

manufacturing and defence – our skills are in shortage. *Working Future* objectives and actions are being guided by reform principles that relate to women’s economic equality. This includes actions such as valuing care work, supporting women who face complex intersecting forms of disadvantage, and reducing workforce gender segregation.

Additionally, all Australian governments have agreed gender equality is a national priority under the National Skills Agreement (available at <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/national-skills-agreement>). National priorities present complex challenges and require focused national effort to ensure all Australians have access to the education, training and support needed to obtain well-paid jobs and meet Australia’s skill needs. The National Skills Plan and jurisdictional action plans, to be established under the National Skills Agreement in 2024, will set out shared ambitions and actions for the VET system to support gender equality.

## Gender lens on VET

Australia’s changing economic conditions require an adaptable, resilient and highly skilled workforce. VET plays an instrumental role in responding to these challenges and opportunities, with more than half (51%) of jobs in the current labour market requiring a VET qualification. In the next ten years, more than 90% of new jobs will require a post-secondary qualification, of these, 44% will require a VET qualification<sup>2</sup>.

VET presents a diversity of skilled employment outcomes and career opportunities in a range of industries. Women are well represented in VET, comprising almost half of all VET students (46.6%). Women have a higher VET qualification completion rate of 50.6%, compared to the national completion rate of 47.6%<sup>3</sup>. Women also make up over 60% of Fee-Free TAFE Tranche 1 enrolments, with nearly 130,000 women enrolling in a qualification under the program<sup>4</sup>. Of note, First Nations women, women with a disability, and women from low-socioeconomic backgrounds exhibit participation rates higher than the national average for those cohorts<sup>5</sup>.

These figures mask the fact that women’s participation in VET is heavily skewed towards traditional gender roles, with women dominating VET courses, occupations and careers in the Health Care and Social Assistance, and Education and Training industries. These patterns also align across women's VET in secondary school and Fee-Free TAFE choices. Almost 75% of women apprentices in-training are in non-trades roles (including Child Carers, General Clerks and Hairdressers)<sup>6</sup>.

The Australian Skills Guarantee (Skills Guarantee) is one example of how the Australian Government is supporting women in trades. The Skills Guarantee will introduce national targets for apprentices, trainees and paid cadets working on Australian Government funded major projects, valued at \$10 million or more. From 1 July 2024, the initial targets for women on major construction projects will be 6% for women in apprenticeships and traineeships and 4% for women in trade apprenticeships and traineeships. The targets will increase each year to drive sustainable, achievable change. The targets will reach 12% for women in apprenticeships and traineeships, and 10% for women in trade apprenticeships and traineeships in construction by 2030. Flagship construction projects (projects with a contract value of \$100 million or more) will be required to set more ambitious targets for women<sup>7</sup>.

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2 Treasury, *Working Future: The Australian Government’s White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*, September 2023 (<http://treasury.gov.au/employment-whitepaper/final-report>)

3 National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), *VET qualification completion rates, 2022* (<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022>)

4 Reporting from Jurisdictions, Quarter 2 2023

5 NCVER, *Total VET students and courses, 2022* (<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/total-vet-students-and-courses-2022>); Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *National state and territory population, June 2022*

(<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/jun-2022>); NCVER, *VET qualifications completion rates, 2022* (<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-qualification-completion-rates-2022>)

6 NCVER, *Apprentices and trainees, March quarter 2023* (<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/apprentices-and-trainees-2023-march-quarter>)

7 DEWR, *Australian Skills Guarantee, 2023* (<https://www.dewr.gov.au/australian-skills-guarantee>)

## Occupational and industrial gender segregation

The share of Australians with high levels of education has been rising, particularly for women. Although women have lower rates of workforce participation and are more likely to work part-time, there has also been an increase in women's participation in full-time work.

Employment participation continues to vary considerably across the life course of Australians, with more marked life-course impacts for women. In the past, this impact was apparent in women's withdrawal from employment during the years of raising children, today it presents itself as an increased uptake of part-time work during these years. Higher proportions of women than men work part-time hours across their careers, largely as a means of balancing work and unpaid caring responsibilities. Additionally, women's workforce participation choices are also affected by traditional gender stereotypes, unpaid domestic work, industry and occupational segregation, and the prevalence of discrimination and harassment in some workplaces<sup>8</sup>.

Traditional societal gender norms and the gendered nature of VET choices is mirrored in the gender composition of industries. Women dominate the Education and Training, Health Care and Social Assistance industry workforces, comprising more than a 70% share in both. These industries are also predicted to experience some of the highest future workforce growth. Men dominate 7 of the 19 industries in Australia and account for more than 80% of the construction and mining industry workforces. Further, on average, male dominated industries and occupations record higher average wages than female dominated industries and occupations. Gender segregation of industries and occupations is a key driver of the gender pay gap<sup>9</sup>.

While women's workforce participation in Australia is at an all-time high, the underemployment rate for women is above the average and that of men. In May 2023, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated more than 600,000 employed women were seeking to increase their hours of work. The top three industries with the highest reported ratio of underemployed persons are primarily supported via VET pathways and also report workforces with a majority of women<sup>10</sup>.

We know women face barriers to working the hours and jobs they want for a range of reasons. Specific cohorts of women experience additional barriers, for instance women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations women, women returning from a career break, women who are single parents, and women experiencing or who have experienced domestic and family violence. Women also report incentives that would increase their workforce participation include flexible work arrangements (working part-time, working set hours on set days, ability to work school hours and ability to vary start and finish times); support for training or study to improve skills; and access to a mentor or someone to offer support in the workplace.<sup>11</sup>

## Next steps

You are invited to provide a submission by 5pm AEDT, 18 December 2023. More information is available at <https://consultations.dewr.gov.au/> and if you have any further questions about this discussion paper, please contact the department at [wiv@dewr.gov.au](mailto:wiv@dewr.gov.au).

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8 Australian Institute of Family Studies, Employment of men and women across the life course, May 2023 (<https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/employment-men-and-women-across-life-course>)

9 Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), Australia's gender equality scorecard, February 2022 ([https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020-21\\_WGEA\\_SCORECARD.pdf](https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020-21_WGEA_SCORECARD.pdf))

10 ABS, Chart 19: Underemployment ratio, by Industry, May 2023 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/underemployed-workers/latest-release#industry>)

11 ABS, Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, 2020-21 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/latest-release>)