

December 2023



# SUPPORT FOR EQUITABLE VOCATIONAL AND ADULT EDUCATION: ADDRESSING INEQUITY IN OUR SKILLS SYSTEM



A Budget proposal to the Commonwealth Government  
presented by Women in Adult and Vocational Education  
(WAVE)

## Who is WAVE?

WAVE is a national network of women involved in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and adult education. WAVE provides research, policy advice and advocacy to Australian and State/Territory Governments on gender equity in skills and adult education policy and also provides input into T/VET and adult education regionally and internationally. We are supported within each state by local representatives who, in turn, contribute collaboratively to national events and governance. Formed in 1985 WAVE is the first and only national independent, non-government organisation for Australian women and girls in the adult, community and vocational education and training sector/s.

Our mission is to advocate so that Australia's vocational education and training and adult education systems are equitable for all women and girls. Our vision is for a future where women and girls can participate fully in all aspects of work and democratic society, through equitable and transformative vocational and adult education.

### Our Way of Working

WAVE undertakes its work within a feminist framework recognising that intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation can impact a person's capacity to access and benefit from Australia's vocational and adult education system/s. As such, WAVE is keenly aware of the importance of centering lived experience in our work. We advocate for the vocational and adult education system to enhance its inclusivity, relevance and affordability for those who may be left behind to provide a coherent voice for under-represented, vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The transformative power of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning that centre gender equity is at the core of WAVE's values.

As leaders in the areas of gender equity and vocational and adult education, WAVE is uniquely placed to provide expert advice to Australian and State/Territory Governments on ways that these systems can be equitable for all Australians. We can provide partners, members and stakeholders with deep understanding of the last 40 years of evidence in VET and adult education and gender equity from Theory of Change to Theory of Action and monitoring and evaluation of results.

We work in collaboration and in partnership with organisations, leaders and communities that share an appreciation of the breadth of challenges associated with gender inequity, especially as they relate to Australia's national adult education and skills system/s.

WAVE's mission is to partner with organisations and individuals with a shared commitment to social justice in the co-production of sound research and advocacy.

## Summary

The Commonwealth has acknowledged the significance of formulating policies and programs that actively contribute to and advance gender equality and address inequity.

This submission proposes the initiation of efforts to establish the fundamental framework necessary for ensuring equity in Australia's skills system starting with the Jobs and Skills Councils and the capacity and capability around these organisations. Aligned with this objective, the budget proposal supports essential elements of the existing skills policy infrastructure, - Jobs and Skills Councils, evidence collection, and strategic guidance. The proposed resources for the 2024 Federal Budget are dedicated to foundational tasks aimed at identifying and eliminating obstacles to equitable skill development. Moreover, the proposal aims to guarantee equal opportunities in learning and training within the national skills landscape.

The proposed budget allocation of \$24.85 million over five years is instrumental in supporting the Australian Government's pursuit of a staggering \$128 billion return, as determined by the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET). This substantial investment is geared towards unleashing the full economic potential of women in Australia. The strategic focus of the national skills policy under this proposal is on enhancing completion rates, addressing inequities that drive skills shortages, and ultimately boosting productivity.

The key to achieving these objectives lies in the establishment and development of specific structures and architectures, and this proposal marks the crucial initiation of this transformative work. Upon implementation, we anticipate that the return on investment will play a significant role in realizing a substantial portion of WEET's 10-year plan, with ongoing reforms in the skills and education sector promising further contributions. This proposal stands as a pivotal step towards unlocking economic prosperity and fostering inclusivity through targeted investment and strategic development.

This initiative constitutes crucial foundational efforts essential for enhancing the skills system, optimizing government investments in skills, aligning policies with gender equality, conducting equity assessments, and elevating safety standards in training. In the immediate future, it will leverage the government's primary advisory and implementation structures to address impediments to participation and facilitate the implementation of guidelines. In the mid-term, it becomes an integral part of a system designed to make skills and training more accessible and equitable, particularly for individuals facing discrimination. Over the long term, it aims to mitigate skill shortages, establish equitable policies for skills development, and contribute to the realization of the Commonwealth's policy vision for gender equality.

In essence, this foundational work is pivotal for ensuring more equitable access for Australians and communities, providing relevant, realistic, and transformative skills development that benefits both our society and economy.

### Key Contact

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## Why is this foundational architecture needed?

*'...despite pockets of excellence, the education system is mired in inequality. It highlights uneven development of skills and capabilities across the population ...(in Australia)...'our education and training systems are dogged by inequality. No matter which way you turn, which measure you use, parts of our population are missing out and falling behind'.*

Source: Lamb, S, Huo, S, Walstab, A, Wade, A, Maire, Q, Doecke, E, Jackson, J & Endekov, Z 2020, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. In Butler, Elaine and Ferrier, Fran, 2022-2023. *A Fair Go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training* VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide,

### The Australian skills system is inequitable and has been for decades.

Participation in VET skills development and training is gendered both across the type of training that occurs (fee paying, apprenticeship, delivery), the industry segment (construction/aged care) and also, the level of qualification achieved (across the AQF spectrum where higher number of women go into university than VET). (ABS *Education and Work Australia*, May 2022)

The experience of VET is gendered with close reading of non-completion data showing that women leave VET learning for “personal reasons” whereas for men, it is because they have achieved the skills or have a job. (NCVER *Total VET Student Outcomes 2016-2021*, Gender x Main Reason Discontinued Training via VOCSTATS)

The outcomes of skills system differ and deliver different returns depending upon gender where more men go into higher paying roles, and women into lower paying, more casualised jobs. (ABS *Education and Work Australia*, May 2022)

The Australian Skills system reflects, reinforces and reproduces our gendered workforce.

Capital investment in VET is gendered whereby higher resources and funding is provided to male dominated skill pathways and less funding and resources to female dominated skills pathways. (WAVE *Response to Call for Submission to Terms of Reference for Australian Government Employment White Paper*, 27 November 2022)

The drivers of inequity found in capital, pathways, completions and participation also drive risks to student safety with persistent reports of workplace sexual harassment on the job and off the job. <sup>1</sup>

### The VET sector itself is inequitable.

While the gender pay gap in education and training is in favour of women up to the age of 30 (it) “...crosses thereafter as men start to earn more on average than women, resulting in a gender pay gap that touches 20 per cent by the age of 55.” (2022 BCEC/WGEA *Gender Equity Insights 2022*, p9)

WGEA tells us that for the tertiary education sector – the most representative of education organisations delivering skills programs including vocational education and training – that while the majority of employees are women, the majority of those in leadership are male, and the pay gap is 8.4%. (Workplace

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<sup>1</sup> See Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne. Jobs Queensland, *Apprenticeship, women and workplace culture A Literature Review* October 2021, 2021 National Student Safety Survey <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/expert-appointed-support-safer-university-campuses> and Australian Human Rights Commission *Respect@Work Nature and Prevalence of workplace sexual harassment* <https://www.respectatwork.gov.au/individual/understanding-workplace-sexual-harassment/nature-and-prevalence-workplace-sexual-harassment#:~:text=Who%20is%20being%20sexually%20harassed,in%20the%20previous%20five%20years>

Gender Equality Agency – *Tertiary Education within Education and Training Summary Diagram* of 232,075 employees within 107 organisations of any size. As at 17/08/2022

## The Australian Government has a vision for gender equality.

The policy direction for the Australian Government is clear. Gender Equality is a clear pathway to wellbeing, economic prosperity, and national productivity. To illustrate:

### Working Future

This White Paper puts forward a vision for a: “a dynamic and inclusive labour market in which everyone has the opportunity for secure, fairly paid work and people, businesses and communities can be beneficiaries of change and thrive. We are working to create more opportunities for more people in more places.”<sup>2</sup>

Working Future identifies the “ongoing challenge” of the gender pay gap stating that “The Government wants all workers to benefit from fair pay for the work that they do”<sup>3</sup> and also recognises that more needs to be done to address the barriers to gender equality.

### Measuring What Matters

This landmark report speaks of the cross-cutting dimensions of “Inclusion, equity and fairness... “as key to ensuring “

... that wellbeing outcomes are fairly shared amongst the population. The alternative – high inequality and entrenched disadvantage – affects social cohesion and may hinder economic growth by limiting access to education and perpetuating disadvantage within communities and across generations.<sup>4</sup>

The framework includes a number of indicators to demonstrate wellbeing from a gendered perspective including the gender pay gap, experience of family violence, homelessness, and unpaid care work.

### Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) 10 Year Plan

The final report from the **WEET** identifies the challenge facing Australia:

Despite some progress over recent years, Australian women still face deep and broad-ranging gender inequality and continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid labour across all spheres of life. From being caregivers, nurturers and educators to taking on professional roles and community leadership – women’s essential contributions are often undervalued and unpaid, perpetuating economic inequality.<sup>5</sup>

The report recognises the compounding forms of discrimination and disadvantage that face women in our employment and education systems:

Australian women are highly educated, yet the influence of gendered norms shape the educational pathways and career opportunities available to girls, boys, women and men. Meanwhile, women experience incomplete and disrupted learning across their lives as they juggle paid work, unpaid domestic labour, child-rearing and caring for others (e.g., ageing parents or grandparents).<sup>6</sup>

Crucially, the report therefore recommends that

*The Australian Government must provide women in Australia with lifelong, accessible, flexible and affordable education and skill building. They must also remove existing*

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government (2023). *Working Future. The Australian Government’s White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities*. September 2023 p. vii Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/p2023-447996-working-future.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Op Cit p. viii

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government (2023). *Measuring What Matters: Australia’s First Wellbeing Framework* July 2023, p14. Commonwealth of Australia. [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721\\_0.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721_0.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) (2023) *A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023-2033*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Commonwealth of Australia, p.7. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/10-year-plan>

<sup>6</sup> Op Cit p.12

*disincentives and inequities that perpetuate industry and occupational segregation and sustained pay and wealth gaps (Recommendation 4)*

Source: Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (2023). *A 10 Year Plan to Unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian Economy*, p.28.

In addition to the forthcoming *National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality*<sup>7</sup> the Australian Government has also expanded its gender responsive budgeting approach now requiring all Australian Government departments to undertake gender analysis for all New Policy Proposals (NPPs) and Cabinet Submissions.<sup>8</sup>

## Skills Policy

### National Skills Agreement

The 25<sup>th</sup> of August Communique from the Meeting of Federal, State and Territory Skills Ministers agreed that the “SA will be the first to embed a model for shared national stewardship to provide national and State and Territory leadership on skills delivery shared priorities – including... gender equality”.<sup>9</sup>

### Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) – 2023 Roadmap

*...more will need to be done across all pillars of the national skills system to better understand the barriers that lead to gendered outcomes across training and education pathways and in occupations, industries and workplaces – from gender norms, perceptions and culture, to access and participation issues.*

Source: Australian Government & Jobs and Skills Australia (2023). *Towards a National Jobs and Skills Roadmap. Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023*, p. 52.

The inaugural October 2023 Roadmap recognises the impact of gender inequality in the Australian labour market noting that “a heavily gender skewed workforce may constrain labour supply, increasing the likelihood of a skills shortage. Improving the gender balance of occupations may be a way to address skill shortages in areas of the labour market”.<sup>10</sup> The Roadmap also recognises the role of social cultural factors such as gender that can be barriers to meeting “future workforce needs and coordinated action should be taken to address these challenges”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/gender-responsive-budgeting>

<sup>9</sup> DEWR. (2023). *Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council Communique-25 August 2023*. Retrieved from Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR): <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-commonwealth-state-relations/resources/skills-and-workforce-ministerial-council-communique-25-august-2023>

<sup>10</sup> Australian Government & Jobs and Skills Australia (2023). *Towards a National Jobs and Skills Roadmap. Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023*. October 2023, p. 51. JSA/Australian Government. <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/reports/towards-a-national-jobs-and-skills-roadmap>

<sup>11</sup> Op Cit p. 144

## The solution – a structure to address inequity in our skills system

The solution is to establish a foundation architecture within the Australian skills system that will collaborate with key stakeholders and partners to identify and remove barriers to equitable skill development. The structure will drive the work to address inequality in our skills system and support government to realise its policy goals on gender equality in the national education and training system.

In this way the education and training system will be able to skill more parts of the economy for better outcomes for more Australians businesses and industry and increases in national productivity.

The architecture comprises:

### 1. Establishment of a Strategic Advisory Committee on Equity and Equality in VET:

This proposal recommends the formation of a Strategic Advisory Committee dedicated to Equity and Equality. This committee, comprising expert representatives drawn from social and community; research and evidence leadership in equity and equality including gender equality as well as education, training (VET) and industry experts, will provide essential guidance and strategic insights to ensure that government initiatives align effectively with industry objectives, fostering a collaborative approach towards achieving equity and equality in the national skills system.

### 2. Development of a Long-Term Blueprint for Equity and Equality in VET:

A comprehensive, long-term blueprint will be crafted to address equity and equality within our national skills system using the Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) as the key enabler to change. This blueprint will align with the national *Working Future* framework. It will define the pivotal role of Jobs and Skills Councils in driving equity and equality and establish key performance indicators to gauge the impact of their efforts in delivering the *National Skills Agreement*<sup>12</sup>. The blueprint's implementation will commence with a pilot program involving up to four Jobs and Skills Councils, including rigorous evaluation and impact assessment before broader implementation across various industries and councils.

### 3. Enhancement of Capacity and Capability in National Skills and Education Infrastructure:

This proposal advocates for the development of capacity and capability within the national skills and education system for equity and equality, with a primary focus on strengthening Jobs and Skills Councils, their partners, members, and stakeholders. This initiative aims to empower these entities to play a more impactful role in promoting equity and equality within the national skills landscape by undertaking a needs analysis across the JSCs and their stakeholders, and developing a workforce development plan to develop sustainable skills, knowledge and systems in this national skills infrastructure.

### 4. Addressing Barriers to Equity through National Reporting and Data Systems:

In order to gain comprehensive insights into the state of equity within our national training and education system, this proposal suggests addressing barriers through improvements in national reporting and data collection systems. By enhancing data accuracy and transparency, the nation will be better equipped to assess and understand the current level of equity in the education and training sectors, allowing for informed decision-making and targeted interventions.

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<sup>12</sup> Australian Government (2023), *National Skills Agreement*. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/national-skills-agreement>



## The structure comprises...

*A strategic advisory committee to centre lived experience, focus use of resources and elevate equality in skills system*

The ongoing high-level advisory committee on Equity and Equality situated in Strategic Advice and Engagement Branch, but applied across the broader education and training remit of JSA, will draw upon the model devised by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) and explicated in its Equity Blueprint<sup>13</sup><sup>14</sup>, taking into account contemporary work relating to intersectionality and gender to devise a cross-cutting model for equity and equality for VET, to synchronise the approach and so accountability mechanisms for equity and equality in a new Equity Blueprint .

This committee would work with JSA and key partners to develop and oversee the implementation of the long-term Equity Blueprint that drives the gender and intersectional equity/equality work across the national skills system.

The committee would comprise up to 12 members, plus a chair. Membership would:

- Centre the lived experience of those experiencing disadvantage and multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage (up to 4 representatives including roles tied to First Nations experience and CARM women);
- Speak clearly and represent the lived experience of learners including young people, First Nations and migrant community with a focus on ensuring representation for current students<sup>15</sup> (as per representation suggested above);
- Speak for the range of adult education and training – including accredited and non-accredited, community based, schools based and formal VET education in workplaces and in training settings (2 representatives);
- Employers and employer representatives from male dominated workforces and female dominated workforces (up to 2 representatives);
- Union representation with specific focus on officers who represent women’s and migrant labour issues in union movements (up to 2 representatives);
- Community and social organisations who work with those who experience discrimination and disadvantage in place-based settings, with a focus on skill and employment pathways (up to 2 representatives);
- Academic expertise in learning and education with a particular focus on learners and communities experiencing disadvantage and inequity (up to 1 representative).
- Academic expertise in intersectional (including gender) equity and its application across multiple settings (up to 1 representative)

*An Equity Blueprint for the Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) to create a strong strategic foundation for national stakeholders to address inequity in our skill system*

To establish a truly equitable education and training system in Australia, a strategic and long-term plan is imperative. This proposal advocates for the development of a comprehensive 10-year Equity Blueprint that delineates agreed-upon strategies, goals, and actions necessary to foster equity in the skills development

<sup>13</sup> National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC) (2011), *Equity Blueprint 2011 – 2016: Creating futures: Achieving potential through VET*. 14 February 2011. NVEAC <http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/167334>

<sup>14</sup> For detail see: Butler, Elaine, Ferrier, Fran (2022-2023), *A fair go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training*, VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide, Ch.7, pp. 135 - 154. <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents-equity-access-historical-overview> .

<sup>15</sup> Importantly these students should ideally not be taken from the National VET Awards system at state or federal level as these individuals represent the exceptional in the VET system rather than the normal experience.

and education system. This visionary plan aims to be spearheaded by the Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) in collaboration with Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), overseen by a proposed strategic advisory committee.

Recognizing the pivotal role of JSCs within the national skills system, this proposal underscores their unique position in catalysing change and reform. Engaged in critical activities such as setting training standards, forecasting skill needs, and ensuring alignment with employer requirements, JSCs serve as transformative agents. With their four main functions—workforce planning, training program development, implementation promotion and monitoring, and industry oversight—JSCs are strategically positioned to champion industry-specific equity initiatives and contribute to the evolution of equitable skills development policies.

The proposal contends that the current system faces challenges in terms of equity and asserts the need for structural evolution. The envisioned 10-year Equity Blueprint aims to both rectify this disparity and position JSCs at the forefront of fostering equity and equality. This initiative seeks to create a blueprint that not only addresses existing inequities but is also responsive to evolving societal needs and economic changes. By endorsing this proposal, the Commonwealth Government would be instrumental in investing in a transformative vision for an equitable skills and education system that yields positive outcomes for both the economy and society at large.

The Equity Blueprint would need to be specifically resources and would broadly comprise:

- **Agreed Long-Term Equity Vision:** A defined a long-term vision for equity in skills development and education for the JSCs, that is set in the economic and productivity context of the JSCs as well as the evolving needs of society
- **Clear Goals:** Cross JSC goals that explicitly aim to reduce disparities, promote inclusivity, and ensure equal access to educational and skill development opportunities across the national skills system.
- **Strategies:** Broad initiatives that can be then tailored by each JSC for their own industries, that address intersecting barriers and challenges faced by marginalized or underrepresented groups developing their skills and the workforce
- **Indicators and Measurement:** A set of agreed high level indicators and metrics focused on assessing the impact of the work of JSCs and their stakeholders on equity, allowing for ongoing evaluation and adjustments to ensure progress towards inclusive educational outcomes.
- **Stakeholder Inclusivity:** Collaborative efforts involving key stakeholders, including government entities, educational institutions, industry partners, and community organizations, to ensure diverse perspectives and needs are considered in policy development.
- **Monitoring Evaluation and Impact:** Agreed mechanisms for continuous monitoring and evaluation to track the effectiveness of equity measures, enabling the JSCs their stakeholders and the broader system, to make informed decisions and learn from the strategies as needed.

### **Implementation of the Equity Blueprint**

The proposed approach for implementing the Blueprint involves the pivotal engagement of Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs). Under this strategy, JSCs would collaborate closely with their respective industries, partners, members, and stakeholders to delineate actionable steps, establish timelines, identify responsible parties, and allocate necessary resources to tackle inequities within their sectors. Additionally, the JSCs would play a central role in defining how agreed-upon indicators and measures would be reported, as well as outlining the framework for monitoring and evaluation. This comprehensive approach aims to consolidate insights for strengthening future implementation activities, actively contributing to dismantling barriers and fostering an environment where all individuals can flourish.

To ensure a strategic and phased rollout of the Blueprint, it is recommended that the initial implementation takes the form of a pilot program involving three to four JSCs. This pilot phase will serve as a testing ground, allowing for the practical application of the Blueprint within vocational education and training settings specific to each industry. The outcomes and evaluation of the pilot would be publically shared, discussed and learnt from. The insights gained from this pilot initiative will inform subsequent phases of implementation, ensuring a refined and impactful approach that addresses the unique challenges within various sectors. The Australian Government's support in funding this strategic implementation would be instrumental in catalysing positive change and fostering equity across industries and vocational training environments.

This proposal recommends that the accountability of the implementation of the blue print lies with each JSC with reporting in on progress to the strategic advisory committee, and to the government where this work would be written into JSC funding agreements.

*Building the capacity and capability of the Jobs and Skills Council and key partners to address inequity and equality in the national skills and education system to improve productivity and address skills shortages.*

The enhancement of capacity and capability among key stakeholders within the National Training System is imperative for the sustainable application of an intersectional gender lens across the system's operations, structure, decision-making processes, and outcomes. Recognizing this critical need, it is essential to secure funding, coordination and support for effective capacity building. To facilitate the sustained implementation of this proposal over a 10-year period, we are seeking resources to bolster the capacity and capability of Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) and key partners throughout Australia's skills and education system.

This capacity-building initiative will be conducted in collaboration with experts and key agencies across the country to foster a sense of ownership and strengthen relationships. Collaborative efforts may involve working closely with agencies such as the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) and other state and territory organizations to promote the development of intersectional gender equity within jurisdictional education and training systems.

As indicated above, this component could – depending upon needs analysis – comprise a set of resources, materials and tools that would be owned by all the JSCs and utilised as required to sustainably support their work to apply intersectional gender lens to their programs, activities and outputs including workplans. This stage would also include training and development activities tailored to the role of the JSCs and also to develop the understanding and capacity of their industry networks and stakeholders on equity and equality. The additional benefit of this approach is that it would also build buy in and support, aligning perspectives to shared mission as defined by the blueprint.

An integral aspect of the proposed workplan's implementation is the partnership with expertise from women's groups, feminist organizations, gender equality advocates, and those with lived experiences. Inclusion of diverse perspectives such as women's movements, multicultural and diversity organizations, women with disabilities and First Nations organisations is crucial to the capacity-building process and its effective delivery. This inclusive approach ensures that a wide range of voices and experiences contribute to building a more equitable and intersectional foundation within the National Training System. The requested resourcing is needed to support sustainable collaborative efforts to address inequity.

### *Improving the way skills policy collects and reports on inequity and intersectional experience for better targeting of resources*

This proposal aims to enhance equity in policy and practice by recognizing and building upon prior efforts both within Australia and internationally. To achieve this, we intend to consolidate key academic and peer-reviewed literature on inequities in skills policy and practice. Moreover, we propose to allocate funding for research initiatives focused on equality within Vocational Education and Training (VET) and broader training systems, encompassing not only teaching but also the overall training environment.

In addition to research funding, this proposal seeks financial support to modernize Australia's VET and education data collection systems. The objective is to enable more comprehensive and systematic data collection on gender and various intersecting barriers faced by our students and end users. This effort will also allocate resources to ensure transparent reporting on skills participation, reflecting how the skills and training ecosystem delivers outcomes to all Australians, particularly those encountering intersecting barriers to learning and employment.

To initiate this transformative process, we propose a proof-of-concept staged approach, beginning with a pilot program across two states. This pilot will apply a gender and intersectional lens to data collection, encompassing the AVETMISS standard and aligning with Jobs and Skills Australia's (JSA) skills atlas initiatives. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) will play a pivotal role in executing this proof of concept, fostering collaboration and laying the foundation for a more equitable and transparent skills and training ecosystem. The requested resources will fuel essential initiatives, contributing to a more inclusive and effective national skills and education landscape.



## Timeline of Delivery for Proposal

Component Milestone	Timeline indicates broadly when key milestone will be completed by								
	April 24	Nov 24	April 25	Nov 25	April 26	Nov 26	April 27	Nov 27	Apr 28
<b>National Equity Advisory Committee and secretariat</b>									
Consult with key stakeholders within government and through JSC on Terms of Reference including aligning governance arrangements to current advisory structures and policy									
As per government process commence recruitment processes									
Interview candidates									
Appoint and onboard									
Commencement meeting									
Schedule of meetings ongoing and report in									
<b>Establish Equity Blueprint</b>									
Analyse/review JSC workplans and relevant skills policy with intersectional (including gender lens) and undertake broader needs analysis of skills policy (eg JSA workplans) for key parameters of plan									
Consult with JSCs and Government on scope and nature of blueprint									
Draft blueprint in consultation with JSC's and their industry stakeholders and VET sector partners									
Engage with JSCs on drafting and refine									
Identify pilot JSCs to trial implementation of Blueprint									
Finalise Blueprint and launch/communicate									
Commence pilot JSC's – support to enable pilot sites to implement blueprint with their industry stakeholders and VET partners									
Evaluate and Monitor impact									
<b>Capacity and Capability Building</b>									
Undertake needs analysis across JSC's and their advisory mechanisms on current equity and equality practice and capacity									
Identify key priorities and areas to build awareness, knowledge and skills in equity across JSC infrastructure and their stakeholders									
Collaborate with JSC and their industry to design and develop resources and tools for use through the JSCs workplan and its implementation									



Work with each JSC to build capacity and capability supporting the team to work with their industries and key stakeholders									
Evaluate and monitor impact									
<b>Research and Evidence</b>									
Define goals with NCVET and JSA with JSC input and collaboration with reference to priorities in the National Agreement									
Undertake needs analysis of current reporting and data collection of VET with an intersectional gender lens to ascertain gaps in methodology and reporting with specific reference to AVETMISS Standard and JSA skills atlas initiative									
Draft first outcomes and scope of work on AVETMISS standard in consultation with Jurisdictions, NCVET and JSA									
Draft first outcomes and scope of work on JSA Skills Atlas in consultation with Jurisdictions, NCVET and JSA									
Consult on scope of work for proof-of-concept scope of work to strengthen JSA Skills Atlas and AVETMISS Standard and the way reports and data on VET's impact on students facing intersecting barriers occur									
Finalise scope of work for implementation through VET data and reporting systems									

## What will this proposal deliver

The systemic value of this proposal will be shown through:

### *More Australians access training pathways...*

Because the barriers to participation are correctly being identified and addressed, more Australians will be able to access training pathways that are equitable.

### *Increased completion rates...*

By addressing the social determinants of health and intersecting barriers to completion the recommendations from the *National VET Completions* report will have higher impact and return.

### *More parts of the economy skilled..*

Jobs and Skills Councils can identify and implement improved strategies to develop the skills of a wider range of both the economy and the community. These strategies aim to address the barriers prevalent in our skills system that have limited their availability.

### *Enables equity issues to be addressed in priority industries...*

The inequity challenges inherent in developing the workforce for key industries – such as Australia’s Clean Energy Industry - can be addressed. The proposal provides systemic support to tackle key challenges in Australia’s more gender segregated industries such as clean energy sector, to address skill shortages.

### *Realisation of Government vision for gender equality ..*

The proposal is a key enabler to Jobs and Skills Australia fulfilling its legislative remit as well as supporting the Government’s broader vision for gender equality as described in *Working Future*, and in the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET)’s *10 Year Plan*.

### *Greater levels of productivity and return to the economy...*

As described in the WEET report, enabling women to develop “skills across a lifetime through accessible, flexible and affordable education and training programs” will deliver if we have “a more inclusive and fit-for-purpose economy that enables full participation by women.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) (2023) *A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023-2033*, Ibid.

## What it will address?

### *A national VET and Skills Architecture that is not set up nor does it have the capacity to address inequity*

To implement the vision of the Australian Government as defined above will require a systemic and structural shift in our education and training system as, currently, the current VET and skills system is not ready to realise these goals.

#### **Leadership and Accountability not present**

The first recommendation of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce’s report is that the Australian Government “must provide leadership and accountability for driving economic equality outcomes and embed gender equity into its decision making, budgeting and policy design, implementation and evaluation mechanisms.”<sup>17</sup>

At present there is nowhere in Australia’s Vocational Education and Training, skills and education system that provides this. The recommendations of the WEET report also talk to investing in the Australian Public Service to improve capability including “gender analysis of policy design, implementation and assessment catering to the specific needs and remit of different agencies and their policy end-users.”

Again, the VET and skills sector has not undertaken this work, and as a result the equity and equality outcomes that are currently being planned for in the skills ecosystem will not be realised without this leadership or capability in place.

#### **The VET sector not set up to deliver a “fair go”**

After undertaking a thorough analysis of landmark policy and documents across 40 or so years, Butler and Ferrier note that: “While it is well recognised that Australia prides itself on a high-quality education system, it can be argued that currently it is neither equitable nor inclusive, with Australia ranking in the bottom third of OECD countries according to UNICEF research conducted in 2018.”<sup>18</sup>

Across this analysis, Butler and Ferrier conclude:

*... we... agree that a comprehensive review and reset of Australian VET is urgently needed, building on the best of what has been achieved so far but resisting more tinkering around the edges. Fortunately, as discussed ...and due in no small way to a cascade of disruptive and urgent contemporary crises, this moment in time offers a unique opportunity for the redesign of a VET sector that is equitable and inclusive, within a transformed institution of education.*

Source: Butler, Elaine and Ferrier, Fran (2022-2023). *A Fair Go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training*. VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide, p.199

#### **National VET Completion Rates**

The *National Vocational Education and Training Completions* report rightly recognises that there are many factors “that influence the learning journey” which require “wrap-around supports aligned to learning

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<sup>17</sup>Op Cit.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, Elaine and Ferrier, Fran (2022-2023) *A Fair Go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training*. VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide, p.198. <https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents-equity-access-historical-overview> citing Chzhen, Y, Gromada, A, Rees, G, Cuesta, J & Bruckauf, Z 2018, An unfair start: inequality in children's education in rich countries, Innocenti report card 15, UNICEF Office of Research/Innocenti, Florence, Italy, viewed February 2023 <<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/995-an-unfair-start-education-inequality-children.html>>.



characteristics and needs (to) assist learners through to completion”<sup>19</sup>. The report rightly recognises the ongoing challenge facing women in male dominated trades to complete training, and also the paucity of evidence in VET to address the reasons for non-completion – not only of women in male dominated trades, but across all skill areas. However, the report limits its opportunities to address non-completions by not including the gendered nature of learner experience and examining intersecting barriers to non-completion that do exist.

The recommendations and their implementation can be enhanced by applying an equity lens to the recommendations such as:

- Any professional development to assist learners with complex needs being inclusive of intersecting barriers to completion, and social determinants of health;
- Ensuring that equity of career and course advice is inclusive of the intersecting barriers that may prevent take up and use of any career advice (e.g. gender, disability, exposure and experience of family violence, single parent families, low-socio economic status, migrant and refugee background);
- Building employer capability to ensure that all factors in the workplace increasing completion of learning (e.g. safety and wellbeing) are included;
- Applying intersectional lens to the design of courses and learning programs.

### Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs)

JSCs are being tasked with a significant mandate

A recent set of consultations held by WAVE with leadership of all but two of the JSCs demonstrated to WAVE that the JSC’s clearly understand the need to address inequity in their industries but do not have the requisite capacity or capability to do so. While WAVE understands that all JSCs have agreed that “diversity and inclusion” must be a key shared priority for action across the organisations, as advised by a recent newsletter of the JSC SkillsEquipped there is a “desire to increase and improve workplace diversity- but (stakeholders are) not sure how (to)...”.<sup>20</sup>

Feedback to WAVE shows that the JSCs would benefit from capacity building support and leadership to enable the JSCs to work with their industries and skills stakeholders to address intersectional inequity in the Australian skills and labour system so that the JSCs may play their role to achieve the goals and ambitions of the Australian Government in gender equality.

### Student Experience

Through a range of consultations held by WAVE and other key stakeholders across the last 12 months, there is an ongoing concern expressed regarding student safety and wellbeing. Centring equity and equality is crucial for preventing gender-based violence. Gender equitable workplaces benefit from improved productivity and economic growth, enhanced productivity and attract and retain employees. In addition to making sure that the workplace experience is legal and in keeping with regulations such as the Equal Opportunity Act, OH&S regulations and, Fair Work Act, workplaces – both education and training sites and, those that provide on the job learning experience for students (e.g. apprentices) play a significant role in preventing gender-based violence.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Skills SA, *National Vocational Education and Training Completions: A report produced through the Secretariat of the National VET Completions Taskforce* October 2023, p. 5. Government of South Australia, Department of Education <https://skills.sa.gov.au/national-vet-completions>

<sup>20</sup> SkillsEquipped “Latest Newsletter September 2023” *Roundtables Update*

<sup>21</sup> Worksafe Victoria – Work-related Gendered violence including sexual harassment <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/work-related-gendered-violence-including-sexual-harassment>

A combined submission to the Australian Government on Australian Apprenticeship Support Services from Tradeswomen Australia Group and National Association for Women in Construction contains quotes from organisation members that highlight the need for apprenticeship services to ensure that sexual harassment is addressed:<sup>22</sup>

Need to tackle sexual harassment - systems and employers need to be aware and have the processes in place to manage disclosures

Sexual harassment needs to be re-framed as a safety issue.

Need to tackle sexual harassment in the workplace – any strategies that are linked and aligned to social equality and gender equality.

Workplace culture and the importance of safe culture must be addressed. What policies and procedures are in place. Healthy environment is good for everyone.

We need to create long lasting retention by having safe supporting on site environments. We have to recognise that the (poor) behaviour is there.

There have also been a range of reports and investigation into inequity in VET and specifically into the impact of inequity on women in male dominated trades. This includes:

- Australian Government, The Senate, Finance and Public Administration References Committee: *Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women's economic equality*, 2017
- Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne.
- Bridges, D., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., Wulff, E., Bamberly, L., & Jenkins, S. (2018). *The Female Tradie Shortage: Why Real Change Requires A Major Cultural Shift*.
- Women NSW. (March 2013). *Women in Trades: the missing 48 per cent* (Women NSW Occasional Paper). Sydney: NSW Government Family and Community Services.

All of these reports and many others repeatedly share the same facts:

- There is a persistent and consistent low completion and participation rate of women in male dominated trades.
- There is a persistent risk to women on male dominated working sites to their safety and wellbeing – this is increased if the women are young, and also if they are from a migrant/refugee background.
- There is an entrenched cultural barrier to equal participation of women in male dominated trades that is entrenched by systems and structures.

For the same consultation Women in Adult and Vocational Education, Inc.<sup>23</sup> recommended that the Australian Government enable and support the national apprenticeship systems to:

- Be skilled and capable to address intersectional gender inequity;
- Understand the prevalence of sexual harassment and risk to women LGBTQ+, migrants and refugees and young people by working in male dominated trades;

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<sup>22</sup> Tradeswomen Australia and National Association for Women in Construction *Submission to Consultation Paper on Australian Apprenticeship Support Services*, December 2022

<sup>23</sup> Women in Adult and Vocational Education *Response to the questions outlined in the Australian Apprenticeship Services and Supports Discussion Paper* December 2022 <https://wave.org.au/response-to-the-questions-outlined-in-the-australian-apprenticeship-services-supports-discussion-paper/>



- Design and implement transformational gender equity practices that do not seek to “fix women” but rather deal with the structural and systemic issues that entrench and drive gender inequity;
- Appreciate and value the lived experience of women’s lives recognising that women carry more of the care and domestic load, have increased risk to their mental health and wellbeing, are poorly paid compared to men, and are discriminated against due to the gender.

Without addressing the above the completion rates will not be addressed, diverse communities will continue to not feel included in the Australian apprenticeship system and the future needs of employers (that is to have skilled labour) will not be met.

## The Budget and the return

The final report of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) speaks to a 10-year plan to “unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy”<sup>24</sup>. The report recognises the gendered reality of skills and educational pathways. The return of this contribution when supported through the range of recommendations is \$128 Billion.

On the basis of the evidence on the return and value of improved completion rates, addressing of skills shortages and improvement in productivity, we estimate that the return on the following costs would be at least 10% of WEET’s advice over the 10 year plan for the reform to the skills and education sector alone - that is \$12.8 billion.

Given that the Australian Government expenditure on VET was \$10.9 billion across delivery, employer assistance and other expenditure<sup>25</sup> (e.g. research, policy and administration) the below ask represents on average per year 0.05% of the VET Budget in one year<sup>26</sup>.

Or, another way, each year **the investment equates to around \$2.45 per woman** to start to support better outcomes from our VET system for them, their communities, the workplaces that hope to recruit them and, their families.<sup>27</sup>

Role	Comprising	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	Sub Total per resource
<i>National Equity Advisory Committee and secretariat</i>	Funding to remunerate approximately 12 representatives per year plus support secretariat services and have primary oversight of blueprint, capacity building and research and evidence projects.	.5	.51	.52	.53	.54	2.6
<i>Establish Blue Print</i>	To comprehensive, long-term blueprint will be crafted to address equity and equality within our national skills system through the JSCs. This includes the pilot of the implementation across 4 JSCs and resources to coordinate and lead the work.	.75	1.5	2.0	2.0	1.5	7.75
<i>Capacity and Capability Building</i>	To develop the capacity and capability within the national skills and education system for equity and equality, with	1.0	1.5	1.5	1.5	.5	6.0

<sup>24</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET), *10 Year Plan to Unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy* Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government October 2023. Ibid

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.ncver.edu.au/news-and-events/media-releases/government-vet-expenditure-at-record-high>

<sup>26</sup> Calculated on by averaging the spend proposed across each year of the above budget from 2024 to 2028 equaling an average of \$5.17MillionAUD

<sup>27</sup> Calculated on the basis of NCVER reporting that in 2021, 2.13 million women enrolled in nationally recognised VET courses across Australia.



	a primary focus on strengthening Jobs and Skills Councils, their partners, members, and stakeholders. Delivered to support the development and delivery of the blueprint and to drive change. Resourcing would be supported through those resources driving the blueprint development and pilot.						
<i>Research and Evidence</i>	To address barriers to identifying intersectional challenges to utilisation of our skills system through improvements in national reporting and data collection systems.  To create a clear scope of work to improve AVETMISS Standard and JSA Skills Atlas to better reflect intersectional experience and barriers in our skills system	1.5	2.0	2.5	1.5	1.0	8.5
	<i>Sub total per year</i>	3.75	5.51	6.52	5.53	3.54	<b>24.85</b>

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Prepared by Women in Adult and Vocational Education, Inc.

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