



National Apprenticeship
Employment Network

Submission to The Department of
Employment and Workplace Relations

Supporting women to achieve VET-
based careers

18 December 2023

About the National Apprenticeship Employment Network

The National Apprenticeship Employment Network (NAEN) is Australia's largest employer network of apprentices and trainees. Across metropolitan, rural, regional and remote Australia, the network employs some 25,000 apprentices and trainees in a diverse range of industries.

The employer network is unique, as it represents the practice of group training under which group training organisations (GTOs) directly employ apprentices and trainees and place them with host businesses.

Under this arrangement, GTOs are responsible for selecting and recruiting apprentices and trainees, matching them to host businesses, meeting all employer obligations including paying wages and entitlements, and arranging formal training and assessment. A significant and integrated service provided by GTOs includes specialised mentoring support for apprentices and trainees.

Importantly, apprentices and trainees may be rotated across host businesses when, for example, work has finished with one host, or new skills are needed by the apprentice or trainee. This agile response to managing apprenticeships and traineeships provides continuity and quality of training and assessment and provides the flexibility that is increasingly demanded by industry.

Predominantly not-for-profit GTOs have been undertaking this skills development and job generating role for some 40 years, equipping an estimated one million apprentices and trainees with vital employment skills.

While some GTOs specialise in particular industries, such as the traditional trades or hospitality, others cater to entire regions and cover a range of industries. GTOs have come to occupy a pivotal role in many communities through their links with enterprises, training providers and schools, as well as in Indigenous and remote communities where they play a central role in careers and training.

GTOs have played a significant part in promoting women in non-traditional trades and creating jobs and training for First Nations people through partnerships with local communities, employers and training providers.

NAEN is pleased to provide this submission aimed at supporting women to achieve VET-based careers.

Recent experience and lessons

NAEN commends the initiative and focus of the consultation paper on "Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers".

NAEN acknowledges the invaluable contributions of women in vocational pathways and emphasises the critical role of tailored support mechanisms in fostering further success, particularly within apprenticeships or traineeships offered through Group Training Organisations (GTOs).

NAEN believes that there has been considerable success in attracting women to VET-based careers, but there is still more that needs to be done, especially in non-traditional trades.

Women's concentration in certain occupations with a VET pathway appears to have intensified, including the care and support sector, health and beauty, and business services.

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) notes a number of occupations with above 90% male workers such as Automotive and Engineering Trades Workers, Construction Trades Workers, and Electrotechnology and Telecommunications Trade Workers.

As JSA observes, "Improving the flow of women into male dominated occupations is a complex proposition, requiring changes to societal norms, workplace culture and conditions as well as effectively encouraging more women to pursue trade-based VET qualifications."

JSA has drawn attention to the link between gender-dominated industries (those with more than 50% of one gender) and the likelihood of skills shortages.

NAEN has argued that overcoming this imbalance is a critical issue for the apprenticeship sector, and VET more generally, since it contributes to a host of adverse outcomes including women's economic inequality, stereotypical behaviours in the workplace, and an imbalance between supply and demand in key areas of priority skills need.

NAEN's experience as the peak body for group training, suggests that there is considerable scope for attracting more women into VET-based careers. Typically, secondary schools make up the majority of women seeking VET careers, but group training organisations (GTOs) have considerable experience working with First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse women, and those who may be returning to the workforce or seeking a change in career direction.

Key elements in the group training approach entail effective promotion of VET careers to girls and women, the use of role models, and ongoing support via field officers who can support women, especially in the early stages of their career.

In addition, GTOs have a rigorous approach to selection of employers for their apprentices and trainees – acknowledging that not all employers have the capacity or ability to provide the level of supervision, or the mentoring, necessary for success. In male dominated industries, there is an added responsibility on ensuring that an employer has the capacity to engage and retain female employees in a safe and supportive environment.

There is already considerable effort among schools, careers advisers and industry to attract women to VET-based careers in some schools and certain regions, but the results tend to be patchy, reliant on exceptional teachers and industry partners.

Greater effort could be focussed on specific industry sectors aligned to local economic and skills needs. The heightened national focus on net-zero transition is an opportunity to encourage greater female participation in areas that provide exciting and rewarding skilled careers, without some of the reputational baggage that unfortunately attaches to sections of the construction industry among women.

GTOs already work with employers who have a commitment to inclusivity and diversity and would be ideal partners to assist in rolling out initiatives, particularly in regional areas, and in industries where GTOs specialise, including electrical, automotive and construction.

Tailored approaches to delivering support to women

The group training sector understands well the barriers that exist for any young person taking up an apprenticeship or traineeship – they are predominantly fresh out of school, it is likely their first full time job, they are undertaking formal training, and must juggle new workplace relationships, culture and personal finances. It is not always straightforward, and not altogether surprising that around half drop out.

The complications can be compounded for apprentices and trainees (or any employee) from a disadvantaged background, CALD community, in a remote or regional location, with a disability, or among some First Nations people. It applies equally to women in non-traditional occupations.

Gender segregated workforces require additional focus across a range of critical areas, including workplace behaviours and culture, layout and facilities, and ready access to support when required.

NAEN believes that successful recruitment, retention and completion of women in VET-based careers relies on a well-integrated approach across the training program, but especially in the early phases:

- It is essential that there is local engagement across schools, employment services, and industry to be able to address individual needs and rigorously match candidates with host employers.
- All apprentices and trainees (particularly women in male dominated industries) must be provided specialist support, workplace supervision and mentoring, while ensuring that the formal training is fit-for-purpose.
- Where there is a need for broader workplace experience or if the relationship between the employer and employee breaks down, there may be a need for rotation to another host employer, thus providing a safety net for the employee.

It is worth noting that the supports provided by GTOs have contributed to higher completion rates compared with direct employment and compared with small businesses, according to NCVER's 2019 report, *'Completion rates for group training organisations and direct employers: how do they compare?'*.

NAEN's national network of group training organisations has successfully used a number of strategies to encourage more women into apprenticeships and traineeships, including:

- Pre-apprenticeships to promote VET choices to female students and their families.
- Industry worksite tours targeted to female school students interested in VET careers.

- Encouraging multiple women apprentices (not just a sole woman) in non-traditional trades.
- GTO field officers who work with host businesses to address on-site facilities and respectful attitudes to women.

Barriers to achieving these goals include:

- Often poor encouragement at the level of school careers advisers.
- Unacceptable behaviour by some smaller employers.
- Views of parents who often discourage women entering non-traditional trades.

Inclusive VET environments and workplaces

GTOs tackle the barriers to women in VET careers through a range of programs that have achieved success. A fuller list of programs run by GTOs to advance opportunities for women are listed in the Appendix. As an example, a female-only pre-apprenticeship program run by one GTO has seen 50% of participants going on to an apprenticeship.

GTOs are able to address specific issues that will impact women entering VET careers, women starting in male-dominated industries, and women returning to the workforce or caring for children.

Solutions can address the provision of childcare services, flexible work hours, and the use of the nationwide GTO women's network as a means for collaboration and resolution of key issues affecting women in the workplace.

Conversations across the network between female CEOs indicate a willingness to come together as a group to advocate and share solutions as a strategic think tank for government, and an initiator for the broad GTO network.

NAEN also believes that at the operational levels, female GTO field officers, managers spread across the country could provide a ready network for discussion, collaboration and feedback on some of the critical issues facing women in VET-related careers and workplaces.

They would be able to offer specialist, real-world advice, accept referrals from women seeking support, and participate in webinars and face-to-face engagement with both women who might be seeking help, and employers who need advice and support.

The group training network is also the largest employer of Indigenous apprentices and trainees and continues to have strong partnerships with Indigenous communities, local businesses, job agencies, schools and training providers to lift Indigenous employment.

A women's network of GTO field officers would be able to bring informed and authoritative advice to employers and employees across key industries and all parts of Australia, including among First Nations communities.

Another initiative of the national network that actively promotes women in VET careers is the 'Today's Skills: Tomorrow's Leaders' (TSTL) program, which seeks to identify Australia's top apprentices and trainees for future leadership roles.

The latest group, comprising 20 apprentices and trainees selected by group training organisations, and five finalists from the 2022 Australian Training Awards, was made up of more than 50% women.

The participants embarked on a week-long intensive career and professional development program that prepares them for future leadership. More than 250 apprentices and trainees have participated since its inception in 2004.

Initiative to support women in VET pathways in the national group training network

NAEN firmly advocates for the recognition and enhancement of its sixty (60) national member GTOs who are dedicated to promoting and supporting women in apprenticeships and traineeships, especially within male-dominated workplaces.

The unique characteristic of the national group training network is its connectedness. GTOs are connected to each other through NAEN, and GTOs are connected to apprentices, field officers, GTO CEOs, host business supervisors, host business CEOs, parents, schools, training providers, communities.

NAEN can influence thousands of enablers to contribute to a safer environment for women in VET.

The value of the employment safety network provided by GTOs, coupled with focused pastoral care and mentoring, offers a crucial foundation for women entering non-traditional fields.

NAEN encourages government to consider the advantage of the group training employment safety net to encourage the supported completion of women, particularly in trade apprenticeships in safe workplaces. The mechanism of group training needs recognition at the workforce planning stages, considering the advantages of mobile opportunities for supported rotation and broad skills development.

The fact that GTOs can connect thousands of workplaces through the national GTO network is unique and will drive change across the apprenticeship system.

NAEN proposes a strategic approach across the national group training network wherein each female apprentice or trainee is connected through an online platform, creating a safe and cohesive "network" across diverse workplaces. This will serve as a catalyst for shared learning, role modelling, troubleshooting, and will provide encouragement and inspiration to women developing their career path.

NAEN's aspiration is for this platform to be developed through federal government funding, also developing dedicated specialist mentors trained to support women in VET careers, who can also serve as role models, tasked with "checking in" on women working in male-dominated environments, especially those in isolated situations without female peers or supervisors.

It is also recognised by NAEN that the workplace supervisor is a crucial element of success for any apprentice or trainee, and an important stakeholder in creating a safe equal gendered workplace and encouraging cultural change. Specialist mentors supporting women would also be coaching workplace supervisors on best practice workplace support.

Specialist mentors would also become role models for GTO field officers and share learnings and best practice across the network.

Moreover, NAEN envisions organising a centralised hub for all "women in trades" organisations to interact with female trade GTO apprentices, and their workplace supervisors, facilitating seamless

access to information, resources, role models, networking opportunities, and skills excellence programs.

Government funding for the national GTO network will significantly augment the resources available to GTOs and their female trade apprentices, creating a more robust and supportive ecosystem.

It is proposed that government work with NAEN to design initiatives to support women in VET pathways in the group training network, and link these to experiences and lessons learned from existing policies and programs:

- Targeted Support Programs: Tailored programs catering to the needs of women in male-dominated fields, encompassing mentorship and networking opportunities.
- Flexible Engagement, Networking and Extended Learning Options: Accommodating diverse responsibilities.
- Financial Support and Scholarships: NAEN advocates for specific financial assistance to ease the burden associated training costs for women whilst maintaining care responsibilities.
- Promotion of Role Models: Showcasing successful women in VET pathways to inspire and motivate.
- Addressing Gender Stereotypes: Challenging stereotypes through awareness campaigns to expand career choices during the recruitment and career planning stages.
- Support Services: Access to comprehensive support services like career counselling and childcare facilities. GTOs are well suited to partner with such facilities.
- Industry Partnerships: Focused collaboration between GTOs and industries to facilitate positive workplace cultures.
- Evaluation and Continuous Improvement: Regular evaluation should aid in refining NAEN programs to meet evolving needs effectively.
- Policy Advocacy: NAEN's advocacy for gender equality policies in VET pathways is pivotal to lead change and deliver increased participation of women through group training.

NAEN proposes that government better equip GTOs to implement gender equality policies in VET pathways, and through their engagement with host businesses, help to drive cultural change. For example:

- Strategies to address economic equality and boost productivity encompass ensuring equal access to education and training generally, closing gender pay gaps, supporting work-life balance, encouraging entrepreneurship, promoting leadership opportunities, combating workplace discrimination, tailoring industry-specific initiatives, collecting and monitoring gender equality data, advocating for supportive government policies, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.
- Targeting specific cohorts of women, including young women, those returning to work, underrepresented fields, Indigenous women, CALD backgrounds, rural or remote areas, mature-aged women, those facing socioeconomic challenges, women with disabilities, and women entrepreneurs, is crucial for tailored support in VET pathways.
- Expanding initiatives to encompass digital skills, entrepreneurship, soft skills development, green industries, healthcare, creative industries, global competencies, workplace health and safety, financial literacy, and innovation is paramount for a comprehensive approach.

Evaluating initiative effectiveness involves setting clear objectives, data collection and analysis, seeking participant feedback, benchmarking, assessing long-term impact, partnership assessment, cost-benefit analysis, qualitative assessment, adaptation and improvement, and transparent reporting.

NAEN stands committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for women pursuing VET-based careers through GTOs and appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this crucial consultation.

The national GTO network looks forward to continued collaboration with DEWR in empowering women in the vocational landscape and achieve stronger outcomes for women in VET careers.

NAEN's experience over some 40 years affirms its belief that this is achievable, and that many of the elements are ready to be integrated into an effective program of delivery.

For any further information or inquiries, please contact:

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Appendix – GTO programs supporting women in VET

The following includes examples of programs operated by GTOs specifically designed to connect women to the trades.

Central Coast Group Training - Building Lady Tradies 2.0

Designed to deliver on the interventions detailed in the Women in Trades Promising Practice Review to increase women's participation in male-dominated industries.

HGT Australia Ltd - Novaskill's Tradie Ladies

Aims to advance the careers of local women seeking employment in construction in the Newcastle and Northern Rivers regions of NSW.

Mas National Limited - Empowering Women into Trades

Aims to improve career outcomes for CALD women by providing them with vocational training and education pathways. Mas National Limited is partnering with group training organisations (GTOs) and employers to increase awareness of gender discrimination across trade sectors.

Master Builders Association of NSW – FLORENCE: Constructing A New Perspective for Women in Construction

The project will develop a dedicated web information portal called FLORENCE. It will provide career information for women looking for careers in construction.

MEGT (Australia) Ltd - Girl Power

The project provides targeted support to break down barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women entering trades by providing work experience, placements, and education sessions. Participants will be informed about trade career pathways and associated remuneration for trade job roles.

MIGAS Apprentices & Trainees - WITS About Us!

The project is a series of 6 podcasts aimed to provide women with trade career pathway information to motivate them to consider a trade career and assist them in starting an apprenticeship or traineeship.

Skillset Ltd - Connecting Women to Trades

The project is an innovative, regionally based trade careers program that will highlight the benefits of trade vocations for women across five Central Western local government areas (LGAs).

Squad Employment Training and HR - Breaking Barriers, Creating Connections with Squad

The project aims to partner individuals and businesses to build the confidence and opportunities for regional women to enter non-traditional career pathways.

Apprenticeship Careers Australia - Women in Auto

The project aims to address skills shortages within the heavy and light automotive industries. The program will help women to access training and employment opportunities in the automotive trade.