

Discussion paper Victorian Women in Energy and Women in Manufacturing Strategies

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Master Electricians Australia (MEA) is the trade association representing electrical contractors recognised by industry, government and the community as the electrical industry's leading business partner, knowledge source and advocate. Our website is www.masterelectricians.com.au

MEA believes that Vocational Education Training in Secondary Schools (VETSS) with an equal weighting to Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR), is the best solution to enhancing gender diversity in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). The benefits include better equipped personnel entering the workforce, enhanced aptitude and competency screening, heightened attraction and retention and greater gender diversity in the workplace through early exposure in a supportive environment. MEA sees this as the pivotal role in actioning societal, structural and systemic change.

MEA are strongly supportive of enhancing gender equality and success amongst STEM trades, post secondary school and support the Victorian Government's proposed vision and outcomes. While we broadly support the proposed priority actions, we believe prioritising VETSS is the most effective and efficient way to enhance all 'proposed priority action areas'.

Discussion Questions

Barriers Facing Women

1. What other barriers do we need to overcome to increase women's participation in the manufacturing and energy sectors, especially for diverse women?

MEA strongly advocate that outdated perception and stereotypes is the key barrier inhibiting women's participation in STEM trades. Throughout many submissions, MEA have strongly advocated that integrating VET training into the secondary school curriculum with an equal weighting to ATAR is one of the key solutions to both gender diversity and skills shortages in STEM trades. Enhanced secondary VETSS will inherently create systemic and cultural change in attitudes towards women participation in STEM to which we can expect natural improvement in other barriers such as "lack of access to trade and field-based jobs", "sexism", "lack of support" and "workplace gender inequality".

Barriers Facing Women

2. Do you agree with the proposed scope, including the focus on increasing women's participation in majority-men roles and in the industry-led approach? Why or why not?

MEA supports the endeavour to increase female participation in male dominated roles, especially with the rapid increase in electrification during a skills-shortage crisis. While we appreciate such cultural shift requires industry involvement, MEA strongly advocate that significant embedded is best started at secondary school level; and this is where the key focus needs to be for long term success.

The current schooling system moulds students to fit an academic structure, leaving behind those who are unwilling or unable to conform. Providing exposure to, and targeted training in, VETSS provides all students equal opportunities for future success by providing a supportive and encouraging environment.

The benefits of VETSS include better equipped personnel entering the workforce, enhanced aptitude and competency screening, heightened attraction and retention and greater diversity in the workplace through early exposure in a supportive environment. MEA sees this as a pivotal tool in supporting societal, structural and systemic change with regards to non-traditional cohorts entering trades.

MEA's position is for Government to prioritise the investment of public funding into a streamlined and integrated VETSS curriculum, with an equal weight to ATAR, to help address diversity in STEM careers, improve completions, and decrease skills shortages. Investing in aptitude and competency at the school level will put many Australians on the first rung of the ladder of success in a rewarding career. All other initiatives and campaigns will potentially be limited in effectiveness and become a less effective use of precious taxpayer money.

3. Do you agree that having a headline strategy supported by three-year action plans is the best model? Why or why not?

Please refer to question 6 below.

Strategies at a Glance

4. Do you agree with the proposed vision for the strategies? Why or why not?

Yes. MEA strongly believe that all industries should be an inclusive and safe space for all genders. Regardless of gender, everyone should have equal access and opportunity to power, resources and opportunities and be treated with dignity and respect. This vision signifies Government's commitment to providing a 'voice' in STEM trade gender equality.

5. Do you agree with the proposed priority action areas? Why or why not?

Yes. However, as noted in questions 1-2, we stress the primary importance of VETSS to change ingrained community attitudes and strongly believe the Victorian Government needs to prioritise investing taxpayer money into enhancing VETSS with an equal weighting to ATAR. By focusing finances in this area, all students are exposed to, and able participate in, STEM trade education and training, inherently fostering systemic and cultural change amongst society leading to greater overall diversity in STEM. Engaging with students at this impressionable age will influence normalisation of equitable participation in, and pursuit of, STEM trades.

We believe prioritising "access to education and training" at a young age will naturally enhance the other proposed priority action areas as women will naturally have "clear and attractive career pathways". With the systemic and cultural shift that will be born from VETSS, we can expect to see improvements in "economic equity and leadership opportunities" and "accountability for workplace culture, diversity and wellbeing".

6. Do you agree with the proposed outcomes sought, including in the context of the proposed timeframe of three years? What would meaningful progress look like in that timeframe?

Yes, MEA agree with the proposed outcomes sought. While we encourage efforts to action such goals as quickly as possible, we believe successful results will take longer as improvements will be seen in our next generation of secondary school students who have been cultivated towards STEM success. Three years is at risk of setting expectations too high with the limited number women currently available, but this time frame could be used to run intensive pilots in some schools to gauge efficacy. We need to ensure the available pool of willing, trained and skilled women are available to achieve these outcomes.

Strategies at a Glance

7. What initiatives have you observed that you consider successful in supporting the attraction, recruitment, retention and/or advancement of women in majority-men sectors, especially in trade roles? What sorts of activities/programs should be prioritised for funding to support strategy implementation?

Please refer to questions 1-6.

8. What can be done to make the culture of majority-men workplaces more inclusive?

Please refer to questions 1-6.

9. What will incentivise employers to incorporate gender equality strategies and drive progress, and what do you see as potential barriers to doing so? Are there any tools and resources that would be helpful in this regard?

MEA is concerned that imposing quotas and requirements on employers without first ensuring there is an available skilled pool of women in STEM trades available to hire is a recipe for failure. Ensuring women are encouraged, trained and appropriately matched to a STEM career that is aligned with their skills will improve attraction and retention rates of women. MEA believes VETSS allows for enhanced aptitude and competency training to ensure this is achieved, thereby resulting in more employers being able to improve their gender equality.

Gender Equality Targets

10. What kind of gender equality targets should be developed as part of the strategies, and how can we ensure they are ambitious but still achievable?

Throughout many submissions, MEA has voiced concern that setting targets risks becoming an onerous, merit-based, box-ticking exercise without the fundamental skilled pool of labour to be achievable thereby avoiding the core issue. The foundation work first needs to be achieved in ensuring employers have access to competent and skilled women in STEM. There is also a danger that quotas could become too focused on public relations as opposed to merits of skills available thereby compromising not only work quality, but also safety. Ensuring awareness training is embedded into the STEM sector from secondary school, ensures that any targets/quotas become meaningful.

11. Would your organisation be supportive of signing onto a charter to commit to pursuing organisational gender equality targets?

Yes. At MEA we work hard to ensure we achieve inclusiveness and diversity, not just with gender, but all diversities.

Conclusion

12. Do you have any general feedback or anything else you would like us to consider for these strategies?

Throughout many submissions, MEA have strongly advocated that integrating VET training into the secondary school curriculum with an equal weighting to Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR) rankings is one of the solutions to both gender diversity and skills shortages. The current schooling system moulds students to fit an academic structure, leaving behind those who are unwilling or unable to conform. Providing exposure and targeted training provides all students equal opportunities for future success by providing a supportive and encouraging environment.

The benefits of VETSS courses include better equipped personnel entering the workforce, enhanced aptitude and competency screening, heightened attraction and retention and greater diversity in the workplace through early exposure in a supportive environment. MEA sees this as a pivotal tool in supporting societal, structural and systemic change with regards to non-traditional cohorts entering trades. There are well established pathways in VET to attain higher qualifications at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level, satisfying pre-requisites and RPL for Tertiary Degree qualifications.

The lack of gender diversity and the skills shortages does not lie within bias hiring procedures, rather the lack of access to VET pathways from a younger age to a wide and diverse cohort. Diversity grows from exposing and curating skills at a young age. Introducing VET courses into

the secondary school curriculum provides an opportunity for all students, regardless of gender, to become skilled in STEM trades. This is where we can expect to see cultural change towards STEM diversity and relieved pressure on the labour demand shortages.

Efforts to improve gender diversity in construction and to resolve the skills shortage should be supported, however, it is necessary to have balance between opportunity and outcome. There is a risk of over-investing in regulatory and compliance initiatives which heavily target underrepresented groups. This is money that would be more efficiently invested in targeting secondary school students that have proven aptitude for occupations.

MEA's position is for Government to prioritise the investment of precious public funding in a streamlined and integrated VESS curriculum, with an equal weight to ATAR, to help address diversity in STEM careers, improve completions, and decrease skills shortages. This naturally creates a larger pool of skilled construction workers that are diverse compared to the guidelines which are pushing an artificial solution that lacks any foundational support to provide sustainable outcomes. Investing in aptitude and competency at the school level will put many Australians on the first rung of the ladder of success in a rewarding career. All other initiatives and campaigns will potentially be limited in effectiveness and become a less effective use of precious taxpayer money.

Conclusion

MEA is supportive of the Victorian Government's goal to increase diversity in STEM occupations. MEA's position is for Government to prioritise the investment of precious public funding in a streamlined and integrated VET secondary school curriculum, with an equal weight to ATAR, to help address diversity in STEM careers.

This would ensure all students are exposed to VET/ STEM pathways at a younger age regardless of background. All students, beyond academia, would have the opportunity to excel in a supportive educational environment best suited to individuals' skills. This creates opportunity for aptitude and competency screening thereby enhancing attraction and retention in the workplace, especially when partnered with the proven GTO employment model.

MEA believes that focusing on training a younger and more diverse generation at the later stages of secondary schooling is the most effective use of Government spending on STEM initiatives and addresses both diversity in STEM and skills shortages. Campaigns targeting post-secondary school to change entrenched behaviours and beliefs in Industry and society, whilst worthy, should be in support of the strategy, not the main thrust of it. To support this assertion, according to NCVER data the current average age of commencing STEM trade is 24 years old, meaning that for an increasing number of citizens, there is a 6–7-year gap between finishing secondary school, and starting a well-paid career in a STEM occupation in areas of vital need for the Australian economy.

MEA believes that first investing in aptitude and competency at school levels initiates Australians on the ladder of success to a rewarding career. All other initiatives and campaigns will inherently be limited in effectiveness and become a less effective use of precious taxpayer money.