



Electrical Trades Union

# ***Building Women's Careers***

AUGUST 2024

Submission to the DEWR Consultation on the  
Building Women's Careers Program

5 August 2024

### *About the ETU*

The Electrical Trades Union of Australia ('the ETU')<sup>1</sup> is the principal union for electrical and electrotechnology tradespeople and apprentices in Australia, representing well over sixty-thousand workers around the country. The electrical workers we represent will form the backbone of Australia's clean energy workforce across all sectors and stages of the transition. The ETU acknowledges the significant task ahead of building up a skilled workforce capable of delivering Australia's clean energy revolution, noting that there already exists a shortage of electrical tradespeople in every State and Territory across the country.

The ETU has actively sought to increase participation in the electrical trades, and within the union itself, including by establishing and supporting rank and file women's committees in our branches, changing our Union's rules to ensure women have a representative in all of our Union's governing bodies, holding annual women's conferences, developing and delivering women-only prevocational training programs and working with industry to set targets to increase the percentage of women in apprenticeships both through industrial instrument settings and through public policy changes such as through government procurement.

The ETU has a long history of collaboration with industry to deliver improved outcomes for women. The ETU is proud to be involved in the operation of nine registered training organisations (RTOs) around the country. These RTOs deliver higher-than-average women's commencement and completion rates in electrical training.

In 2023, the ETU was involved in the joint industry submission to the *National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality*, involving partners from across industry, including NECA, Keystone, Contact Group, Schneider Electric, NAWIC, Fredon Group, Build like a Girl, Master Plumbers Association, Axis Plumbing and the Curtin Institute for Energy Transition. In 2023, the ETU released the *Nowhere to Go* report, highlighting the lived experiences of electrical women working in historically male dominated occupational industries, the barriers they face and key solutions to removing those barriers.

ETU women participate, and in some cases have founded a broad range of formal and informal networks including the Sparkettes, Lady Tradies and Rocking Chicks as well as less formal committees and regular gatherings. Many also sit on formal boards and advisory groups providing advice and expertise regarding the trade, training and their experience as women in male dominated industries. They are well versed in what is needed to address women's participation in the energy transition.

### *Acknowledgement*

In the spirit of reconciliation, the ETU acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today.

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<sup>1</sup> Being a division of the CEPU, a trade union registered under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009* (Cth).

## *Introduction*

The ETU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Building Women's Careers Program Consultation Paper. The ETU, and in particular our national and state women's committees, have been actively involved in numerous initiatives at the workplace, state and federal level to increase the number of women in the electrical trades. This submission has been prepared in consultation with the ETU National Women's Committee, a committee of elected tradeswomen with representation from every branch from every state and territory in the country.

The number of women in the electrical trades has remained stubbornly low. The most recent ABS data puts the percentage of women in the electrical trades at 4.3% in May 2024, an increase of only 2.5% in four decades. The ETU has grown the density of women in our membership from 2% to 5%.

However, there are pockets of hope. Ambitious programs are delivering significant and unprecedented increases in the number of women starting and completing their trades. As we discuss below, key factors in the success of these programs are:

- the active collaboration between different parts of industry, including training centres, unions and employers;
- the active involvement and ongoing feedback from tradeswomen into the design of the program;
- targeted peer mentoring and support for women at the training centre and in the worksite;
- Public advocacy to change the perception of women in trades; and
- Identifying and advocating for best-practice policy initiative to drive structural and cultural change at the worksite, to reduce the barriers to women apprentices completing.

The ETU women's committees and the members they represent have been central to these collaborations. To date, this work has been done in an unpaid, voluntary capacity. However, if these initiatives are to scale to meet the challenge of growing the electrical workforce to meet projected workforce shortages, then any initiative funded through this grant program should look to recognise the skills and knowledge that experienced tradeswomen bring to the table and include provisions to adequately reimburse their ongoing involvement in project design and implementation.

## *Energy Queensland*

For example, the ETU have been working with Energy Queensland Ltd (EQL) and Powerlink to develop a workforce and skills resourcing plan to be adopted by the government as part of their Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan. The plan outlined the parties' commitment to expand the annual apprentice intake at least 10% year-on-year with a focus on working together to develop strategies for increased recruitment of women and First Nations apprentices. As a result, EQL has achieved a record 50% women and 8% First Nations apprentices in its recent 2024 intake. These strategies included leveraging pre-apprenticeship programs.

#### WAVE Program, Centre for U, Victoria

ETU Victoria's training facility, The Centre for U, has successfully run the Women in Apprenticeships Victoria Electrical (WAVE) program in collaboration with Holmesglen Institute, Victorian Trades Hall Council, Australian Women in Solar Energy, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training. WAVE seeks to attract women to targeted information events, recruit them into women-only pre-apprenticeships, and support them with mentoring through the first year of an electrical apprenticeship.

The WAVE project won a Gold Industry Collaboration Award at the Australian Training Awards in 2023. The ETU has had nearly 50 women complete pre-apprenticeships since the WAVE program started in 2021, and over 91% of women that start WAVE and complete the pre-apprenticeship move into successful apprenticeships.<sup>2</sup>

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#### *Recommendations*

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should recognise and value proponents' experience of working in partnership to deliver programs that have substantially and consistently increased the number of women commencing and completing apprenticeships in male-dominated trades.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should favour proponents with experience of actively involving tradeswomen in the development of policies and programs that drive structural and cultural change at the workplace, particularly through enduring mechanisms such as enabling provisions in industrial instruments.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should recognise the need to fund the proper reimbursement of women with experience in the trades to co-design and implement the program.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should consider project proponents (across the whole partnership) of delivering effective programs that have demonstrated success in delivering above average commencement and completion rates for women apprentices.

**Recommendations:** grant guidelines should include criteria for the co-design of projects, with the active involvement of researchers to establish, monitor and report back on the project, and provide advice to iteratively improve projects over the life of the program.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should recognise initiatives which seek to bring together and formalise existing structures, programs and networks to drive scale and deliver a more coordinated national approach.

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<sup>2</sup> The Centre for U, "[WAVE success rate over 84%](#)", February 2023

**Opportunities for Structural and Cultural Change:** *What are the change opportunities within your industry / sector that align with the fundamental elements of the Building Women's Careers Program?*

There are several systemic cultural and practical barriers for women in the workforce which desperately need to be addressed.

A 2022 Essential Media survey (see appendix 1) of electrical apprentices found that:

- 23% of female apprentices considered quitting due to work and culture, and women are 53% more likely to consider quitting due to culture than men.
- Men are 50% more likely to have regular contact with their AASN than women, and women are 10% more likely to have never received any support from their AASN.
- 40% of women in electrical trades don't have access to gendered amenities at work, and only half report consistent access to sanitary bins.

When women are supported and mentored through their apprenticeship, over 90% go on to long term employment in the sector.

In addition to workplace culture, the long hours and lack of flexible working conditions have been cited as key reasons for the low levels of women in the trades. ETU delegates, of all genders, have worked together to win improvements to working conditions to enable workers to better take on parenting duties, including:

- Paid domestic violence leave (prior to this being implemented in legislation), and
- Significant increases in employer-funded parental leave for both parents.

The success of these initiatives directly stems from the fact that they were proposed and advocated for by trades people with direct knowledge of the issues on each worksite and across the sector.

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**Project Partnerships:** *How could project partnerships operate within your industry / sector to achieve the objectives of the Building Women's Careers Program?*

As described above, the ETU has been actively involved in project partnerships that are starting to deliver substantive changes for women in the trades, including in campaigns for appropriate and fit-for-purpose PPE and amenities on site, the design and delivery of targeted pre-apprenticeship programs, and actively consulting with state and federal governments on various policy initiatives to increase the participation of women in the trades.

Their participation in this work has been largely unpaid, and for this work to successfully scale, the government must explore how the project can facilitate the active involvement of tradeswomen, in a paid capacity, to co-design and implement aspects of the program in collaboration with partners from industry and the training sector.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should recognise the need to fund the proper reimbursement of women with experience in the trades to co-design and implement the program.

*VET Pathways: What are some of the ways vocational education and training (VET) could be **Integrated into Building Women’s Careers Program projects**? In developing your response, you may wish to consider: How is VET used in your industry or sector? What skills shortages is your industry or sector facing? What VET pathways and qualifications you would like to see supported via the program? How does VET need to be delivered in order for it to be accessible for women?*

Jobs and Skills Australia has estimated that – on current trends – there will be a shortfall of 32,000 electricians by 2030, increasing to 117,000 by 2050. These estimates do not include the recent “Future Made in Australia” and “Renewable Energy Superpower” policy announcements, which will require an additional 12,500 apprentices by 2030.<sup>3</sup>

Addressing this shortfall will require an increase in overall commencements and completions. It will also require diversifying the electrical trades.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should consider project proponents (across the whole partnership) of delivering effective programs that have demonstrated success in delivering above average commencement and completion rates for women apprentices.

***Sustaining Positive Change and Lessons Learned:** How can we ensure the lessons learned from Building Women’s Careers Program projects are shared, amplified, and continue to be used over time and after the program finishes? In developing your response, you may wish to consider: How can project partnerships support longer term outcomes across their industries or sectors? How can we best share and discuss outcomes and lessons learned across all the projects and with key stakeholders not directly involved in the projects?*

The ETU welcomes the proposal to share and amplify the lessons learned from projects beyond the proposed end date for the program.

The ETU women’s committees noted the number of initiatives to increase the number of women starting and remaining in electrical careers. However, they also noted the number of these programs that had been poorly designed, due to the failure to properly consider the perspectives of women in the trades, and to actively involve all stakeholders. There has also been a failure to properly invest in the work of establishing robust and enduring partnerships that can deliver ongoing programs in the medium to long-term.

The establishment of the First Nations’ Clean Energy Network (FNCEN) provides a strong example of how research processes can be used to establish and build strong networks, that can deliver lasting and effective change.

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<sup>3</sup> See JSA (2003), *The Clean Energy Generation*, p. 165. The 32,000 estimate is based on the ‘central’ scenario, with the Future Made in Australia requirements broadly corresponding to the ‘high’ scenario.



Through a process of deep and broad consultation and engagement, First Nations communities collectively co-designed and endorsed a fit-for-purpose policy and delivery body to champion First Nations priorities in the clean energy transition. This approach avoided the often duplicated and fragmented advocacy systems that become established absent national leadership and coordination. Learning from this model, the *Building Women's Careers* program can play a critical role in assisting women to collectively and collaboratively co-design a fit-for-purpose nationally coordinated entity which would:

- Develop engagement and education strategies and programs and collateral which promote women in energy trades,
- Assist government and industry stakeholders to develop targeted Women's Prevocational training programs and subsequent apprentice intakes,
- Develop and advocate best practice programs, initiatives, policies and standards, and
- Provide advocacy which drives enduring structural and cultural change.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should include criteria for the co-design of projects, with the active involvement of researchers to establish, monitor and report back on the project, and provide advice to iteratively improve projects over the life of the program.

**Recommendation:** grant guidelines should recognise initiatives which seek to bring together and formalise existing structures, programs and networks to drive scale and deliver a more coordinated national approach.

***Program Risks and Opportunities:*** *What do you see as the key risks and opportunities to the success of the Building Women's Careers Program? How could we respond to these?*

Too many programs to increase the participation of women in male-dominated trades are developed without consulting women who have spent time on the tools. The recent online consultation session for this consultation had only a handful of women on the call who had spent any time as a tradesperson. The failure to actively involve tradespeople – and ensure that their experience is valued and their time properly reimbursed - risks developing programs that do little to address the very real structural barriers that exist in training programs and on worksites that are preventing women from joining the male-dominated trades.

Further, the grant program must avoid funding too many separate programs, thereby diluting the scale of the opportunity. Critical to this program's success will be whether it looks to drive deep, effective and systemic change will be critical to this program's success.