

# **Apprenticeships should work for women too: supporting meaningful exploration of ‘non-traditional careers’ for young women**

## **INAP Conference Papers**

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### **Summary:**

Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) undertook a study in 2014 to identify models of career exploration in Australian and international schools. The aim of the study was to find out what barriers young women were facing in undertaking careers involving STEM subjects and in entering the non-traditional trades, and consequently to identify successful models and strategies that could better meet their needs. The resulting recommendations in the report covered a range of models including changes to current government policies and funding, more extensive partnerships between schools and industries, support for a range of taster and career exploration activities commencing early in secondary schools, and models and mentoring to increase apprenticeship opportunities.

**Keywords:** gender, career exploration, models, partnerships

### **Introduction**

Current patterns of participation in Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and trades based fields of education and training reinforce the highly gender segregated nature of the Australian labour force. Far fewer young women than young men are entering post school studies in these industry areas. Whilst women represent almost 46% of Australian employees (ABS 2014b), in the industries of construction, mining and utilities, women account for only around 12%, 15% and 23% of employees respectively. Negative experiences and/or perceptions of workplace cultures in some industries with low female participation, discourage young women’s engagement in associated study pathways. These anomalies indicate a need for a range of interventions including career exploration whilst at school. This paper draws on a recent study conducted by Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) for economic Security 4 Women (eS4W).

### **Methods and research design**

This paper draws from a mixed method study. An electronic literature search and review of international and national sources formed the background to a national online survey of career exploration stakeholders. Key responses that detailed new

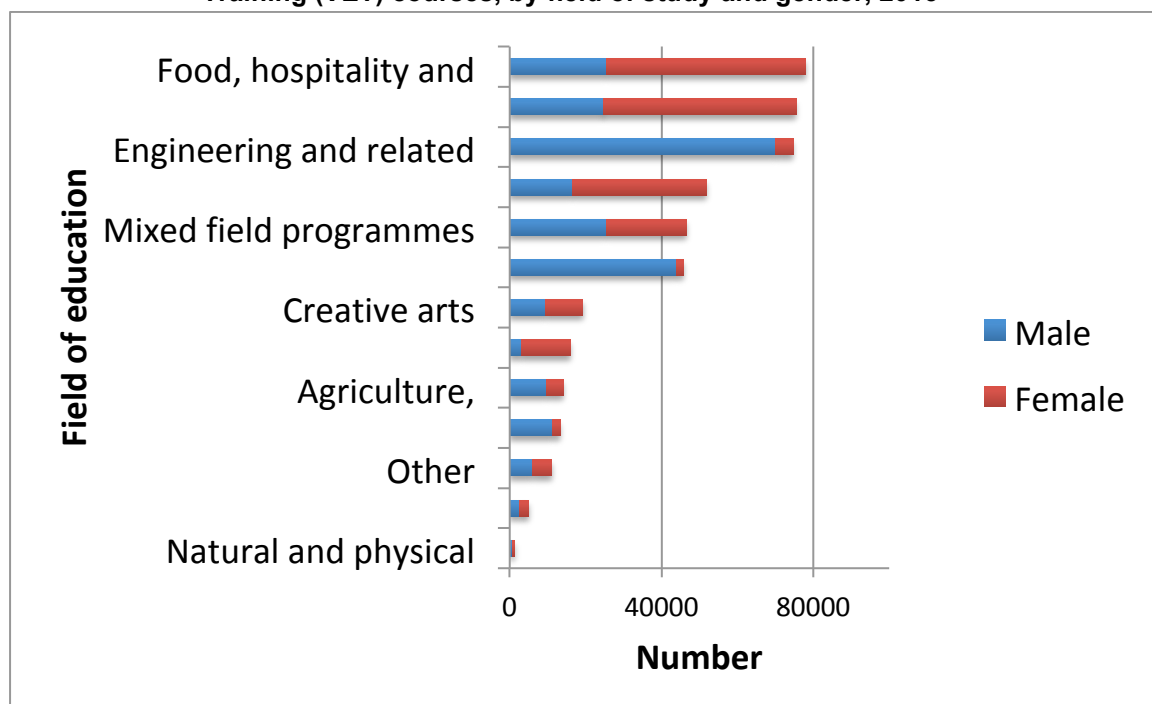
and emerging models of career exploration for young women in STEM and non-traditional industry areas were followed up with semi-structured interviews.

The 217 respondents to the survey represented schools including career education and guidance practitioners, Government departments or authorities, non-profit organisations, VET institutions, academics and peak industry bodies. As well as critiquing current models of career exploration and practices, both the survey and the literature suggested new models and strategies that could enhance the opportunities and aspirations of young women. This paper will focus on these.

## Results

Despite a strong policy-focus on traditional trade VET and apprenticeships within current approaches to VET in Schools (Clarke 2013) and current government policy, participation data indicates that apprenticeship pathways continue to be relatively weak for young women (Rothman et al 2011). Female school leavers aged 15-19 are less likely to enrol in VET study fields. (see Figure 1 below), suggesting there is an on-going pattern of gendered educational participation that reinforces occupational outcomes, with women occupying many of the low-skilled and precarious jobs in a highly competitive job market (McMillan and Curtis 2008). Within this context, effective and coherent approaches to career exploration that support pathways to secure and skilled occupations for young women are important. This paper defines 'career exploration', as encompassing those strategies and approaches used to promote an *active* engagement with and exploration of career options from a young age.

**Figure 1: Number of students 15 to 19 years of age, enrolled in Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses, by field of study and gender, 2013**



Respondents to the national survey highlighted the absence of well-structured opportunities for young women to explore a wide range of occupations during their schooling, leading to relatively narrow educational choices and career options. NCVET data show that from 2009 to 2013, the proportion of women commencing a trade apprenticeship or traineeship has remained a steady 15%, compared to 84.9% of males in 2013 (NCVER 2014).

What strategies did our research show would be useful as elements in career exploration for young women?

- Highly visible female role models and mentors from STEM and non-traditional occupations are a crucial element to exposing young women to a broader range of career options.
- Young women need low stakes opportunities to 'taste' and experience non-traditional and STEM roles and occupations prior to and during their senior secondary years of schooling.
- Critical mass and support networks, whether workplace based or through networks of other women in STEM and 'non traditional' careers are important for young women.
- Intermediary organizations, such as partnership brokers, can play an important role in supporting career exploration and can operate outside the marketised pressures that can negatively influence school career exploration approaches.
- Industry led strategies that actively invite and support both career exploration by young women and longer term female participation in STEM and 'non traditional' industries, occupations and careers.
- National policy with explicit recommendations on the most effective approaches to career exploration, including mandating career exploration programs in secondary schools.
- Early and coherently staged career exploration opportunities that enable young women to reflect on their own skills and interests while exploring relevant options in a broad range of industries, occupations and workplaces, thus extending the range of informed choices available to them.
- A range of educational, industry and community partnerships with schools to enable access to non-traditional and STEM learning and work placement opportunities.
- Professionally qualified and resourced career guidance practitioners in schools, to facilitate career exploration opportunities including widening career choices for young women.

Policy development and reform is required in terms of:

- Coherent national leadership to support schools to effectively embed career exploration activities within their curriculum
- Partnerships between schools and industry in particular, including partnership broker programs
- Professionalisation of career guidance in schools
- Sustainable resourcing to allow the strategies outlined above to be implemented on an ongoing basis

Two further messages were strongly supported. By the time young women are making their subject selections for their senior secondary certificate or applying for tertiary places, it is too late to start career exploration as many of the foundations of career aspirations have already been laid. This includes gendered perceptions and stereotypes regarding 'male' jobs and 'female' jobs. Career exploration in secondary school should ideally start early (e.g. Year 7/8) and should continue in a coherently staged approach throughout the secondary school years.

Workplaces also need to change. Negative experiences of young women in part-time roles and work experience during high school and/or perceptions of workplace cultures in industries and occupations with low female participation can significantly discourage young women's participation in the associated study pathways in both STEM and non traditional careers. Running parallel to changes in career exploration approaches in schools, there are implications for industry and employers to consider how their industries can address perceptions of negative workplace cultures and promote positive exploration opportunities for young women.

Our research did identify successful models of career exploration and partnerships that expanded career options for young women, but also recognised that these were often driven by passionate individuals or organisations. The challenge for policy makers is to provide the funding, knowledge and support so that such models can be adopted by all schools and adapted to suit local needs and contexts. Young women both deserve and need the opportunity to pursue a wider variety of career paths than is currently the case, and their participation in a wider range of jobs is necessary for Australia's economic growth.

## Literature

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