

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Women and apprenticeships: An Australian perspective

Erica Smith*

Institute of Education, Arts and Community, Federation University, Victoria 3350, Australia

ABSTRACT

The paper sets out to provide evidence towards explaining the disadvantaged position of women in apprenticeships in Australia. Women form only about one-third of apprenticeship commencements and are disproportionately concentrated in occupations which have proved vulnerable to policy changes, due to the influence of certain stakeholder groups. Despite well-meaning efforts, women have been reluctant to enter the "traditional trade" occupations. The paper provides evidence which explains the policy shifts which firstly extended the system to feminized occupations, and then disadvantaged those occupations. It proposes a new insight, based on an historical precedent, into recently renewed attempts to attract women into masculinized trade occupations. This is a major question which cannot be answered in one paper, but the paper will aid understanding.

Key words: women in apprenticeship, gender in occupations, funding and government policy

INTRODUCTION

Apprentices in Australia may be adults or young school-leavers; only a small proportion are still at school, unlike in many other countries (Smith & Brennan Kemmis, 2013). The apprenticeship system in Australia, as in the UK, was established in the immediate post-World War II period, where the system was at that time confined to certain occupations, and was dominated by trade unions (Gospel, 1994). Such apprenticeships involved a three- to four-year contract of employment, and a lengthy period of study in the occupational area, at, or provided by, a training provider.

The expansion of the apprenticeship system beyond these traditional trades, which, apart from hairdressing, were primarily taken up by young men, was achieved by the introduction of one and two year "traineeships" in the mid-1980s, organized along similar lines to apprenticeships. Traineeships were introduced in occupational areas such as retail, tourism, hospitality and business,

that had not previously provided apprentice-like training (Smith, 2022), and now are becoming more common also in health and welfare occupations. From 1997, funding for apprentice/trainee training became available to private training providers as well as the public system of technical and further education (TAFE) colleges, through a system known as "user choice" (Smith & Keating, 2003); this helped the growth of traineeships but also led to suspicion among some commentators (Smith, 2022). The separate term "traineeship" is retained in everyday usage, although official data use the umbrella term "apprenticeship".

Hence apprenticeship has been more available to women, through the growing diversity of occupational coverage, for around 40 years, and also the role of women in the labor force more generally has changed considerably over that same period. Yet women's occupations remain disadvantaged in apprenticeship policy and women's participation is much lower than men's (Smith, 2022).

***Corresponding Author:**

Erica Smith, Institute of Education, Arts and Community, Federation University, Victoria 3350, Australia. Email: e.smith@federation.edu.au.

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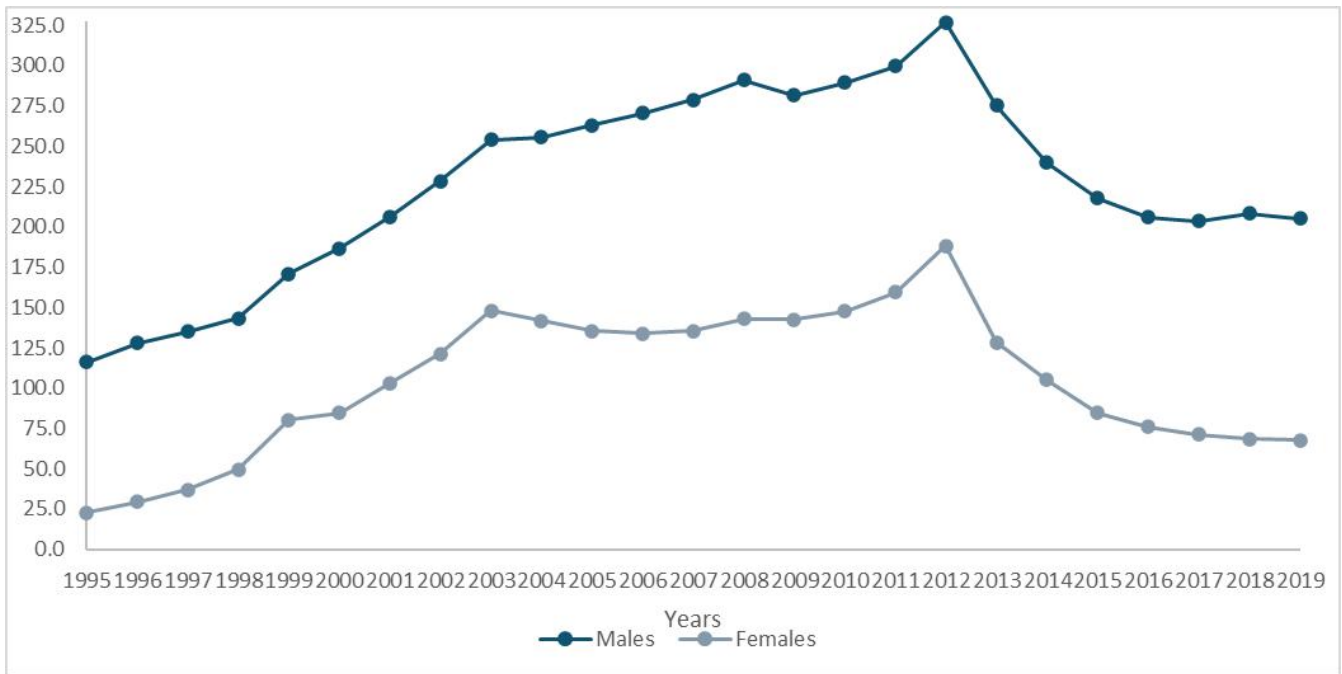


Figure 1. Number of apprentices (including trainees) in-training, in thousands, Australia, 1995-2019, by gender. Source: Derived from NCVET's National Centre for Vocational Education Research) "Apprentices and Trainees" data collection.

As in most countries, apprenticeship policy is created through negotiation among the social partners, employers, trade unions and governments (Burgi & Gonon, 2022) with the relative influence of one party or another varying over time, and depending on the government in power. The paper asks how apprenticeship policy has considered and shaped women's role in apprenticeships, including but not confined to, traditional apprenticeships. How has this arisen, and what might change. This is a major question which cannot be answered in one paper, but the evidence provided will aid understanding.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Firstly, major government-commission reports were analyzed for their gender implications, and recent initiatives related to women in traditional trade apprenticeship were analyzed. The topic was then researched through analysis of official apprenticeship data from 1985 onwards to show the proportion of women in the Australian apprenticeship system, the relative concentrations of women and men in different occupational areas nationally, and the funding for those occupations, using the State of Victoria as an example; each State or Territory sets its own funding rates. The funding rates are no longer publicly available, but access was provided *via* a TAFE college. Finally, recent economic changes, specifically skill shortages, industry 4.0 skill needs and green energy skill needs were analyzed for the effects

which they have had both directly and indirectly on women's participation in, and access to, apprenticeships.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows a late twentieth century move away from traditional gender assumptions about apprenticeships (1954) to an expansion of the system to include feminized occupations (1985, 1991). Changes to the system were then enacted *via* the introduction of funding for "traineeships" often in feminized occupations. However, the attempts to roll back this system began from 2011, and are evident in the 2024 report.

Figure 1 shows how these policy directions affected total numbers of apprentices in Australia, and on the gender breakdown of apprenticeships, from 1995 to 2019.

The two peaks in Figure 1 reflect favourable funding environments for apprentice training providers, with a sharp drop-off after 2011 when funding ceased for many female-dominated occupations. Women's participation increased at times of peak numbers. For the subsequent five years from 2020 the proportion of women continued at about one-third of apprentice commencements. There were slight increases in the proportion of women during the 2020-2021 year and the 2021-2022 year during coronavirus disease (COVID), when there were generous subsidies for employers to take on apprentices (Smith, 2024). In those two years, numbers rose, and as in previous peaks shown in

Table 1: Gender implications of major government reports

Date	Report name	Make-up of committee	Treatment of gender
1954	Commonwealth-state apprenticeship inquiry-report of committee	9 members: all men	Females, and female apprenticeships, were explicitly excluded from the considerations
1985	Report of the committee of inquiry into labor market programs	5 members: 4 men and 1 woman	Proposed traineeships and other programs to provide equal access for females. Noted that 96% of trade apprentices were men
1991	Skills training for the 21st century, a report on skills training: apprentice-ships and traineeships	12 members: 10 men, 2 women (all members of Parliament)	Principles included enhanced access of women to trade areas and in "extending structured training to traditionally female occupations"
2011	A shared responsibility: apprenticeships for the 21st century	Seven members: 5 men, 2 women	Proposed ending support for apprenticeships in some occupations which will "substantially" reduce female commencements. Suggests that more women could be attracted to traditional trade areas to compensate
2024	Skills for tomorrow: Shaping the future of Australian apprenticeship (released in 2025)	Two authors: 1 man, 1 woman	Main gender emphasis was on encouraging women into male-dominated trades. Recommends reducing employer incentive for non-trade occupations, with no discussion of potential effects on women

Table 2: Male-dominated and female-dominated apprentice/trainee commencements Australia, 2023-2024 year (occupations with over 2000 commencements)

More than 85% male-dominated, % male	More than 85% female-dominated, % female
Electrotechnology (93.4%)	Community services (90.8%)
Construction, plumbing & allied industries (93.9%)	Health (89.2%)
Automotive industry, retail & repair (91.0%)	Hairdressing and beauty services (85.0%)
Metal and engineering (89.8%)	
Furnishing (89.6%)	
Information & communications technology (86.3%)	

Table 3: Evolution of women's inclusion in masculinized apprenticeships in Australia

Phase	Feature	Reason
1	Women excluded	Protection of male privileges and behavior patterns
2	Women allowed to enter	For women's benefit so that they can access "skilled work" and higher pay
3	Women encouraged to enter	As per Phase 2, plus: to reduce bad behavior in masculinized workplaces
4	Women conscripted	As per Phases 2 and 3, plus: to address "skill shortages", <i>i.e.</i> , labor shortages

Figure 1, the gender gap narrowed slightly.

We now examine male-dominated occupations compared with female-dominated occupations. Table 2 shows occupations with 85% or greater commencing apprentices of one gender or the other. The first four male-dominated occupations had 10,000 or more commencements; while none of the female dominated occupations did.

For the occupations in Table 2, the funding rate per hour of training in Victoria in 2024 varied from \$13.50 AUD to \$15.50 AUD per hour for the male-dominated occupations, while the rates for the female-dominated jobs ranged from \$7.00 to \$10.00 per hour, except for hairdressing (always a "trade apprenticeship") which received \$13.00 per hour. Some other female-weighted occupations received far less funding, *e.g.*, retail \$3.50, business \$4.50 per hour.

Female entry into traditionally male trade appren-

ticeship's has been nominally encouraged for some time (see the earlier government reports in Table 1), but the proportion of females in those occupations has not increased, as Table 2 shows. Many barriers exist including perceived gender roles, safety issues, masculinized work environments and lack of female toilet facilities (Simon & Clarke, 2016). Post-COVID labor shortages and the growth in male-oriented "green energy" jobs have created national concern (Smith, 2024) and a recognition that gender imbalance affects shortages. It has now become economically important to attract women to these apprenticeships, which are now receiving the bulk of government funding and policy attention. The 2024 "Skills for tomorrow" report in Table 1 suggests measures such as subsidies for small and medium business to employ female apprentices in trades, and a "Building Women's Careers" initiative is funding pilot projects to "advance structural and cultural change to improve women's access to flexible, safe, and inclusive training and work opportunities in the key male-dominated industries". The shift in emphasis from

equity to skills imperatives suggests that the measures may succeed only temporarily, however.

Table 3 suggests a possible interpretation of the move towards including women in these male-dominated apprenticeships.

These developments echo imperatives during the Second World War in Australia. Reekie (1985) describes the Australian government's mobilization campaign encouraging women to take up work in "essential" industries such as munitions, clothing and food processing, followed by "direction" into such work in the second half of 1942. One wonders whether, in the future, there may be an analogous movement of women back into their former occupations or activities as there was following the War, in 1945.

CONCLUSION

Internationally, apprenticeships are gendered in nature, reflecting occupations' gender composition (Pan, 2015); vocational education and training (VET) is also gendered (e.g., Gessler, 2019). The focus on women entering these apprenticeships, as opposed to support for all apprenticeships, has returned the gender debate in apprenticeship to a decades-old comfort zone for many actors in the Australian system, and prevents a critical analysis of the treatment of women in apprenticeship policy. There is unlikely to be a sudden large increase in females considering a "trade" apprenticeship, and instead one might to hope for a move towards equal treatment of women's occupations in terms of funding levels and respect, to supplement the encouragement to women to choose different types of occupation.

A large-scale international research project into occupational coverage of apprenticeships, to supplement evidence given in an International Labor Organization survey of G20 countries (Smith *et al.*, 2018), of female participation, and of the intersection of those two, would be extremely useful in informing these debates and influencing policy-makers.

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Author contributions

Smith E: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final

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Conflict of interest

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Data availability statement

Data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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