

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Reference man's hidden hand: Gender, power, and the social construction of skill in vocational education and training

Kit McMahon*

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE), Moorabbin 3189, Victoria, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Australia's apprenticeship system perpetuates gender inequity through the social construction of skill and systemic barriers. Drawing on transformative gender theory and Bacchi and Eveline's "What's the Problem Represented to Be" framework, it analyzes how apprenticeship policies and practices privilege masculinized norms while marginalizing women's participation. The research reveals how Training Packages, as foundational policy mechanisms, codify gendered assumptions about skill and work. These assumptions are then amplified through apprenticeship structures that compound discrimination through employer-led hiring models, workplace cultures, and financial incentives that fail to account for women's economic realities. The findings indicate that meaningful reform requires moving beyond "fixing women" approaches to address structural barriers and reimagine how skill is defined and valued in vocational pathways.

Key words: apprenticeships, gender equity, social construction of skill, systemic barriers

INTRODUCTION

Australia's apprenticeship system reflects and reinforces gender inequities that pervade both vocational education and labor markets (Butler & Ferrier, 2022). This systemic discrimination stems from how skill is socially constructed through Training Packages and apprenticeship policies, which tend to privilege traditionally masculine industries while devaluing feminized work and experience. This paper examines how apprenticeship practices operate within a broader gendered regime in Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector, where seemingly neutral policies actively reproduce inequality.

Current initiatives aimed at increasing women's participation in male-dominated apprenticeships primarily adopt a deficit model, focusing on "fixing

women" through mentoring, pre-apprenticeship programs, and promotional campaigns. However, these interventions fail to address how skill definitions, workplace cultures, and apprenticeship structures systematically disadvantage women.


The paper argues that Australia's VET system operates on an implicit "reference man" model (Clark, 2024), analogous to the standardized model developed in the 20th century for process and product design. Just as the traditional reference man—a white, Western male aged 20-30, weighing 70 kg and standing 170 cm tall as used in defining effective doses for radiation by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP, 1979)—has shaped everything from health services to building design, the VET system assumes a default student who is male, white, aged 17-21, able-bodied, urban-dwelling, financially supported by family, safely housed, healthy, literate, and resourced for learning. This

*Corresponding Author:

Kit McMahon, Women's Health in the South East (WHISE), Moorabbin 3189, Victoria, Australia. Email: kmcmahon@whise.org.au.

Received: 27 March 2025; Revised: 15 May 2025; Accepted: 19 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2025.0945>

 This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, which allows others to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

normalized standard systematically disadvantages anyone who doesn't fit this profile.

Drawing on transformative gender theory (MacArthur *et al.*, 2022) this analysis demonstrates that meaningful reform of apprenticeship policy must move beyond individual-level interventions to address these deeply embedded systemic barriers which are designed around VET's own "reference man".

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs Bacchi and Eveline's "What's the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) framework (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010) to analyze apprenticeship policies and practices and, unpack any bias gendered assumptions that lie at the heart of these policies. The research examines policy texts including Training Package frameworks including examination of current key Australian VET policy texts, including the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR)'s Training Package Organizing Framework and Qualifications Reform process (DEWR, 2024), and industry demonstration projects of the qualifications reform initiative, such as an Automotive sector trial (AUSMASA, 2024). The research also analyzed apprenticeship program guidelines, and recent apprentice reform documents in particular the Australian Government's Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System (DEWR, 2025) This analysis was supplemented by engagement with transformative gender theory and critiques of human capital approaches to vocational education (Bonvin, 2019; Calkin, 2018; Moodie & Wheelahan, 2023).

The methodology investigated three interconnected dimensions: how skill is socially constructed within Training Packages and how these emerge in the setting/place of the recent Australian Government Qualifications Reform initiative, how these frameworks are applied through apprenticeship policy, and how workplace implementation creates additional barriers. This approach reveals how seemingly neutral policies actively reproduce gender inequity through their underlying assumptions including the reference student/man and structural arrangements.

RESULTS

Training Packages, which are developed by skills councils and consist of qualifications and units of competency, forming the basis of VET curriculum. They purporting to be "gender neutral" in their definition of skills, actually contribute to workplace inequality. Though these packages are implemented through apprenticeships and traineeships, they tend to privilege

technical trades over interpersonal and care-related competencies. This bias, combined with VET's flawed assumption of equity in both the Australian workforce and student population, ultimately exacerbates gender segregation and increases the risk of discrimination.

The analysis reveals persistent systemic inequities within Training Package reforms, and their linked implementation through apprenticeship policy, which prioritize industry-defined standards while marginalizing gender considerations. Training Packages—defined both as the delivered product and the development process—demonstrate at best ambivalence and at worst active privileging of skills associated with male-dominated trades, while simultaneously devaluing skills and knowledge traditionally linked to feminized work, such as care work, communication, and interpersonal capabilities. This dichotomy perpetuates occupational segregation and wage disparities across sectors and is subsequently translated and augmented across apprenticeship and traineeship policy and practice.

This gendered construction of skill is amplified through apprenticeship structures in three keyways.

First, employer-driven hiring models reinforce occupational segregation by placing control over apprenticeship opportunities primarily with existing male-dominated industries. Without structural incentives for inclusive hiring or requirements for gender-equitable workplaces, these models perpetuate historical patterns of exclusion.

Second, financial structures systematically disadvantage women apprentices. Wage structures reflect broader gender pay gaps, with apprenticeships in male-dominated industries paying significantly more than those in feminized sectors. Support mechanisms fail to account for women's economic realities, including care responsibilities and lower base wages.

Third, workplace cultures remain hostile to women's participation, particularly in male-dominated trades. High attrition rates among women apprentices reflect persistent harassment, discrimination, and lack of support. Yet apprenticeship policies provide no meaningful mechanisms for addressing these cultural barriers.

Significant structural silences emerge within the VET policy frameworks, particularly regarding workplace discrimination, gendered violence, and the systemic undervaluation of feminized labor. These omissions maintain an exclusionary VET structure that fails to acknowledge or address women's lived experiences in apprenticeships. The reforms operate on an assumption of a "neutral" learner—typically envisioned as a young, able-bodied, male apprentice—thereby overlooking the

diverse needs of women, gender-diverse individuals, and those managing care responsibilities.

The research further identifies that recent reforms in both training package and apprenticeship policy demonstrate a tendency to focus on modifying specific technical aspects of existing policy, rather than addressing the necessary cultural and structural transformations required to combat systemic discrimination in VET. Without targeted intervention to create safe and inclusive workplace environments, the VET system continues to reinforce hostile conditions that impede women's success. This impacts not only their entry into male-dominated trades but also their ability to achieve equitable outcomes across all learning pathways. This finding underscores a critical gap between policy objectives and the practical requirements for achieving genuine workplace transformation and gender equity in vocational training.

Recent reforms risk reinforcing these inequities. While acknowledging gender disparities, policy responses continue to prioritize individual-level interventions over structural change. The privileging of male-dominated industries in both funding allocation and policy attention further entrenches existing patterns of segregation.

CONCLUSION

The research identifies how apprenticeship policies compound gender discrimination through multiple mechanisms, particularly through the fundamental structure of Training Packages and their implementation. Australia's apprenticeship system operates within a broader regime of gender discrimination in VET. Rather than serving as a pathway to equity, current apprenticeship structures amplify inequities embedded in Training Packages while adding additional barriers through workplace implementation.

Meaningful reform requires moving beyond surface-level interventions to address how skill is fundamentally defined and valued. This includes redefining competencies to recognize feminized skills, implementing gender-responsive financial incentives, mandating inclusive workplace practices, and ensuring equitable funding across sectors. Only by embedding intersectional gender analysis throughout apprenticeship structures can the system shift from reinforcing inequities to dismantling them.

The findings emphasize that increasing women's participation in VET—let alone male-dominated apprenticeships—requires more than promotional campaigns or pre-apprenticeship programs. It demands transformation of the underlying systems that define

skill, structure workplace learning, and shape occupational pathways. This includes addressing hostile workplace cultures, implementing meaningful accountability for discrimination, and reimagining apprenticeship models to account for diverse lived experiences.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgement

The author would like to acknowledge the work of the staff and partners of the Victorian Women's Health Sector and Women in Adult and Vocational Education whose work to address intersectional inequity across the social determinants has deeply informed the authors perspective and research.

Author contributions

McMahon K: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Source of funding

This research received no external funding.

Ethical approval

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Not applicable.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement

No additional data.

REFERENCES

- AUSMASA. (2024). *Qualifications Reform Automotive Demonstration Project: Final Report*. AUSMASA.
- Bacchi, C., & Eveline, J. (2010). Approaches to gender mainstreaming: What's the problem represented to be? In *Mainstreaming Politics Book Subtitle: Gendering Practices and Feminist Theory* (pp. 111-138). University of Adelaide Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.20851/j.ctt1t30564>
- Bonvin, J. M. (2019). Vocational Education and Training Beyond Human Capital: A Capability Approach. In S. McGrath, M. Mulder, J. Papier, & R. Suart. (Eds.), *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training* (pp. 273-289). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94532-3_5
- Butler, E., & Ferrier, F. (2022). *A fair go for all Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training*. NCVET.
- Calkin, S. (2018). *Human capital in gender and development*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315522098>
- Clark, M. (2024, March 5). Who is reference man victorian government. The Victorian Government. Retrieved February 11, 2025, from <https://www.vic.gov.au/media/944669>
- DEWR. (2024, December 10). VET Qualification Reform. Australian Government. Retrieved February 4, 2025, from <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-reform/vet-qualification-reform>

- DEWR. (2025, February 4). Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System 2024 Final Report. Australian Government. Retrieved April 8, 2025, from <https://www.dewr.gov.au/australian-apprenticeships/strategic-review-australian-apprenticeship-incentive-system>
- ICRP. (1979). Report of the Task Group on Reference Man. *Annals of the ICRP*, 3(1-4), iii. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6453\(79\)90123-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0146-6453(79)90123-4)
- MacArthur, J., Carrard, N., Davila, F., Grant, M., Megaw, T., Willetts, J., & Winterford, K. (2022). Gender-transformative approaches in international development: a brief history and five uniting principles. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 95, 102635. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102635>
- Moodie, G., & Wheelahan, L. (2023). Human Capital Theory and Its Discontents. In Parry, G., Osborne, & M., Scott, P. (Eds.), *Access, lifelong learning and education for all* (pp. 51-79). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12342-9_3