



HARMONY ALLIANCE

MIGRANT & REFUGEE WOMEN FOR CHANGE

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Submission in response to the Australian Skills Guarantee Discussion Paper

Harmony Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Australian Skills Guarantee Discussion Paper.

This submission seeks to provide key design considerations and potential initiatives to support migrant and refugee women to successfully enter and advance in the Australian workforce.

Our submission addresses the following questions posed by the Australian Skills Guarantee Discussion Paper:

- What can we do to better support women to successfully remain, re-enter and advance in the workforce?
- What can we do to support and encourage women to seek career via a VET pathway?
- Is there an initiative or mechanism that you consider has been successful in supporting and encouraging women to pursue a career via a VET pathway?

About Harmony Alliance

Harmony Alliance: Migrant and Refugee Women for Change is one of the six National Women's Alliances supported by the Australian Government to promote the views of all Australian women and to ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Harmony Alliance's purpose is to provide a national inclusive, and informed voice on the multiplicity of issues impacting on experiences and outcomes of migrant and refugee women, and to enable opportunities for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds to directly engage in driving positive change.

The Harmony Alliance membership comprises over 180 organisations and individuals representing and/or working for the advancement and inclusion of migrant and refugee women. We acknowledge the diversity of experiences of women from migrant and refugee backgrounds and recognise the inherent value of each person, of all backgrounds, genders, ages, abilities, social standings, sexual orientations, or religions. We promote the principles of dignity, equality, autonomy, non-discrimination, and mutual respect.

Barriers to entering the workforce

Migrant and refugee women face intersecting barriers to full participation in the Australian workforce. The current unemployment rate for women from Non-English-Speaking backgrounds is



7.2%, significantly higher than for Australian-born women (5.1%) and the general unemployment rate of 3.4%.¹

Although migrant and refugee women bring valuable skills, experiences, innovation and diversity to the Australian economy, they are often unable to enter the workforce in the same industries and skill level that they were in their home countries. This is due to the discrimination by employers with regard to overseas qualifications and experience as well as the lack of local networks, which play a key role in employment in Australia. Finding a first job opportunity can be difficult.

Despite Census data revealing that people born overseas are more likely to have a post-school qualification,² qualifications and skills recognition is a major barrier for migrants and refugees in Australia. Formal recognition of qualifications in Australia is often a costly, overly bureaucratic and slow process that differs across organisations or industrial bodies assessing the qualifications. This makes the process very complex to navigate.

Migrant and refugee women also face bias and discrimination across the intersection of their gender, ethnicity, religion, and migration status. Sometimes employers are subject to unconscious biases and stereotypes and may consider that someone from a different background or with a different accent – even with Australian qualifications and experience – is not the best fit for the workplace.

A more supportive and inclusive VET

Understanding migrant and refugee women's experiences and needs within the VET system is crucial for a more supportive and inclusive system.

Migrant and refugee women face entry barriers to navigate VET systems. These can include entry cost barriers, language barriers, navigating systems and study pathways, lack of transport, and caring responsibilities. Refugee women can also have other needs due to post-traumatic stress, war, forced displacement and family separation.

Some migrant and refugee women may also face additional barriers that difficult their learning and may need additional support to complete a VET qualification. This cohort may lack the numeracy or literacy skills to successfully completing a VET qualification, for example because they could not access education in their home countries, and experience compounded disadvantages such as housing or financial problems.³ In Australia, the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program supports eligible people with numeracy, literacy and digital skills; however, the eligibility criteria for this program only applies for a small number of migrants and refugees who have working rights in Australia.⁴ It is important to note that secondary visa holders from the Skill program stream cannot currently access this program which likely comprises an important number of migrant and refugee women.⁵

¹ Haque, T.H., Haque, M. The Unemployment Imbalance Between Non-English-Speaking Migrant Women and Australian Born Women. *J. Quant. Econ.* 20, 459–478 (2022).

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, "12 insights about work and study from the 2021 Census", 12 October 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/12-insights-about-work-and-study-2021-census>

³ Harry Savelsberg, Silvia Pignata, Pauline Weckert, "Second Chance Education: Barriers, Supports and Engagement Strategies," *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 57, no. 1 (April 2017).

⁴ "Skills for education and employment", Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, accessed 16 December 2022, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/skills-education-and-employment>

⁵ Coates Brendan, Sherrell Henry, Mackey Will, "Fixing Temporary Skilled Migration. A Better Deal for Australia." (Grattan Institute, March 2022).



Skilled migrant and refugee women have very different experiences through VET programs. Despite holding previous work experience and qualifications, the difficulty in obtaining formal and informal (from employers) skills and qualification recognition to get a job in Australia, forces skilled migrant and refugee women to get an Australian qualification.

Given the need to obtain a job in Australia and have local experience and references, many of them participate in programmes that are under their current educational level or that are not relevant to their previous skills. Another reason that influences their decision is the employability of the programmes offered. Skilled migrant and refugee women are at risk of being subject to a deskilling process where they cannot keep and advance previous skills – such tertiary qualification holders – which are higher than the ones that gain through VET.⁶

The gender segregation of the Australian labour market has also changed the trends in the VET system where women – including migrant and refugee women – are more likely to be enrolled in non-trade programmes.⁷

The VET system should consider these barriers and experiences in the design, delivery, and long-term strategies. Including tailored approaches to different needs and backgrounds could improve the VET system overall and migrant and refugee women's skills underutilisation.

Including preparatory programmes for those who may have been disadvantaged and lack the skills needed to access VET programmes has been proven effective in other countries. Preparatory programmes can help migrants and refugees who do not have the possibility to obtain the skills needed or would take them too many years. These preparatory programs could also serve as a bridge to shift gender stereotypes around specific trades that have been traditionally male dominated.

Preparatory programs should be complemented with assistance – including mentoring, career counselling and assistance with written and practical assignments – to help those with difficulties learning or that are at risk of not completing the programme.⁸

It is also important to recognise that migrant and refugee women are often the main care providers within the family and often lack family or networks that can support them. These caring responsibilities can make more difficult for them to access educational programs such as VET. Increasing the flexibility of the programs with hybrid online sessions and assignments can be beneficial for women who have caring responsibilities or lack transport.

Recommendations

- Include career guidance to match current skills and programme pathways to maximise learning outcomes.

⁶ Sue Webb, Miriam Faine, John Parry & Reshmi Roy (2017) The role of VET in the (dis)placing of migrants' skills in Australia, *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 69:3,351-370, DOI:10.1080/13636820.2016.1278396

⁷ "Submission by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NEVCR) to The Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee," February 10, 2017, http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Gendersegregation.

⁸ "How Vocational Education and Training (VET) Systems Can Support Ukraine Lessons from Past Crises" (OECD, July 1, 2022).



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- Develop preparatory programs to enhance inclusiveness of VET programmes.
- Include flexible options for migrant and refugee women with caring responsibilities and other entry barriers.
- Facilitate interactions with potential employers will improve employability and attraction to VET programmes.