

## SUBMISSION

Submission to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

# Submission to the Building Women's Careers Program – grant guidelines

5 August 2024

**The Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE) is a Learned Academy of independent, non-political experts helping Australians understand and use technology to solve complex problems. Bringing together Australia's leading thinkers in applied science, technology and engineering, ATSE provides impartial, practical and evidence-based advice on how to achieve sustainable solutions and advance prosperity.**

The \$50 million Building Women's Careers Program, as part of the Future Made in Australia initiative, demonstrates a commitment to structural and cultural change in segments of the workforce that have historically been male dominated. These industries will be critical to productivity growth and delivering the clean energy transition, and it is important that women have the opportunity to participate in and benefit from this transition. Supporting women to complete vocational education and training (VET) qualifications and transition into jobs that use these qualifications should be a priority of the program.

ATSE welcomes this program, noting alignment with ATSE's commitment to inspiring and fostering the next generation of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) professionals and leaders. ATSE makes the following recommendations for the grant guidelines, to position the program for successful outcomes:

**Recommendation 1:** Release a large portion of the Building Women's Careers Program grants upfront to enable effective, swift and large-scale solutions with potential for short-term growth and impact.

**Recommendation 2:** Allow and encourage consortia applications from industry, VET, academic and other sectors for Building Women's Careers grants.

**Recommendation 3:** Address the need for inclusive and safe workplaces and educational institutions through the grant guidelines.

## Creating sustainable, large-scale change

Unlocking a large proportion of the funding to be available upfront will enable establishment of at-scale and proven solutions, seeing them through to fruition. It is important to avoid a piecemeal approach to programs as this will be less likely to lead to sustained outcomes, and would therefore not be the most efficient or effective use of the available funding. Smaller programs that do not achieve critical scale run the risk of absorbing funding and energy for limited impact.

This can be seen through the successful example of ATSE's [Elevate program](#), funded by the Department of Industry, Science and Resources (with subsequent additional investment from the Department of Defence). Elevate is effective, large-scale program targeting women's participation in higher education. Elevate awards undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships to women and non-binary people to study STEM degrees, with the aim of addressing gender inequities in STEM. Scholarships include a financial component, as well as wraparound support to scholars, with professional development, mentoring, wellbeing support, and access to events and networking. Scholars are welcome to use the financial component in ways that best support them, such as covering tuition fees, housing, childcare and computers.

The program provides the support that scholars need to stay focused on their studies, while connecting them with the networks to support their career development as professionals and leaders. Elevate scholar, Kiowa Scott-Hurley, has [shared](#) the impact of the program on her career – writing that “while the Elevate program is more than a series of payments, it's those payments which have given me the time and resources to do training, networking, volunteering, public speaking... All the extra activities which will enable me to flourish as a STEM leader”.

Elevate is in-demand, attracting 1,200 eligible applications in 2024 for only 116 places, and has an astounding 98% overall retention rate. By comparison, there is a 25% retention rate for women who enrol in information technology degrees, and a 34% retention rate for women who enrol in engineering degrees, according to the Government's [STEM Equity Monitor](#).

Elevate's benefits are multiplied by sharing its lessons and outcomes through its diverse and collaborative advisory group of leaders drawn from across sectors, as highlighted by the [Diversity in STEM Review](#). This emerged from Elevate's robust evaluation approach. Conceptual alignment with sectoral, national, and international evaluation frameworks enables understandings of the program's impact and provides avenues for shared learnings in supporting underrepresented populations in STEM and beyond.

This early, broad impact has only been possible through decisive up-front investment, allowing for deliberate program design with robust implementation, evaluation and improvement systems built in. It has also prepared the necessary conditions for swift scaling, if and when additional partners co-invest.

Early funding release (with appropriate governance structures in place) allows initiatives to swiftly implement plans, invest in infrastructure, and scale operations without delays, leading to better outcomes

from the investment. Access to upfront funding also enhances the ability to attract top talent and retain the skilled workforce crucial for scaling operations.

**Recommendation 1:** Release a large portion of the Building Women's Careers Program grants upfront to enable effective, swift and large-scale solutions with potential for short-term growth and impact.

## Developing partnerships to deliver effective interventions

A consortium-based approach would be an effective way to deliver new programs that meet the goals of the Building Women's Career initiative. This would enable coordination across system areas rather than a siloed, sector-lensed approach.

This could involve one delivery lead that engages other organisations to contribute where they can add value. For example, organisations that connect with industry, educational networks, and organisations associated with target communities would both provide important contributions and connections for the initiative, but these attributes may not be found in a single organisation. This approach would provide one contact point for government while leveraging the strength of partnerships.

The success of a consortium approach with upfront funding release is demonstrated by the [Advanced Manufacturing Growth Centre's project on advanced materials for aerospace applications](#). This project brought together a consortium of manufacturers, research organisations, and aerospace companies to innovate and produce lightweight, high-performance materials suitable for aerospace components. The upfront funding enabled the consortium to invest in specialised equipment, hire skilled personnel, and conduct extensive research and development, leading to the commercialisation of new materials that meet stringent aerospace standards.

**Recommendation 2:** Allow and encourage consortia applications from industry, VET, academic and other sectors for Building Women's Careers grants.

## Enabling workplaces and education providers to foster a safe and inclusive environment

Organisations engaged in the Building Women's Careers program delivery may need additional support to be inclusive for the target cohorts. As noted by the consultation paper, discrimination presents a barrier to women working in traditionally male-dominated workplaces. By placing women with training providers and employers, the program will need strong supports in place to ensure these institutions are ready and empower women to navigate the challenges that arise. Small and medium business are particularly in need of resources to adapt their workplaces in an achievable manner.

Resources such as [ATSE's Diversity & Inclusion Toolkit](#) can support workplaces to create a safe and inclusive working environment. The Diversity & Inclusion toolkit provides practical advice for STEM-sector small and medium businesses to be more inclusive, with guidance on recruitment and retention. Support for organisations to create safe and inclusive workplaces could either be delivered by grant partners or centrally across the whole program. Progress could be measured against metrics developed by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Embedding this as a requirement within the grant funding guidelines will ensure a high level of compliance, encouraging retention and career progression of program participants.

The Building Women's Careers program may also look to the examples of other initiatives in the STEM sector and beyond to improve gender equity and inclusion in workplaces and educational institutions. The Champions of Change Coalition engages leaders across business, government, community, academic and not-for-profit organisations to be accountable for action on gender equality in their organisations. The Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE) initiative is a leading example of uplifting gender equity, diversity and inclusion using accreditation. SAGE manages Athena Swan accreditation, which universities and research institutions can apply for to demonstrate that they are taking proactive steps to improve gender equity, in line with international best practice.

These initiatives highlight how resources and accreditation programs can be utilised to improve gender equity, including in industry. To embed the cultural change that will be essential to the success of the Building Women's Careers program, the grant guidelines could require participating organisations to

demonstrate their commitment to creating safe and inclusive environments for women and non-binary people to participate and succeed. Such an approach would also comply with the Diversity in STEM review's recommendation to require gender equity auditing for government funding arrangements.

**Recommendation 3:** Address the need for inclusive and safe workplaces and educational institutions through the grant guidelines.

*ATSE thanks the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations for the opportunity to respond to the consultation on the Building Women's Careers Program grant guidelines. For further information, please contact [academypolicyteam@atse.org.au](mailto:academypolicyteam@atse.org.au).*