

Diversity in STEM Review Recommendations

Women in STEMM Australia (WiSA) is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2014, that is widely recognised nationally and internationally as a leading advocacy organisation in Australia for women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM). Our key purpose is to connect, empower and advocate for women and girls in STEMM to have equality in the Australian workplace. We consider women in STEMM as those with STEMM qualifications or experience working in and/or enabling STEMM in industry, research, education, and government sectors.

Women in STEMM Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Diversity in STEM Review. The recommendations presented here are a compilation of the responses received to our online survey, which had 36 respondents. These are from a diverse audience of predominantly women, including intersectionalities such as neurodiverse, culturally diverse, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD), LGBTQIA+, and people of colour from sectors across academia, research, government, industry, startups, media, schools/TAFE and commercial.

By analysing the feedback and suggestions provided by the survey respondents, this submission aims to provide a comprehensive approach that encompasses various aspects of diversity and fosters a more inclusive environment in STEM.

We have broadly summarised the survey responses into three main target areas:

- Women in leadership/role models
- Recruitment without bias
- Culture in workplaces.

Recommendations:

1. Focus on elevating women in leadership.

This ensures women's careers thrive, women are allowed to reach their full potential, and women are able to reach the top positions to effect change.

Training is critical - but not limited to leadership training for women but for all genders to eliminate bias and microaggressions so that women who reach the top can actually have a voice. Barriers which prevent women from being considered for leadership positions need to be removed too.

It is also important to note that some women in STEM have intersectional barriers in addition to gender, having mentorship and sponsorship in addition to their training can help tackle the lack of intersectional diversity in STEM leadership.

Mentorship is a key factor to influence girls developing their interests in STEM, support and recognition should be provided for women in leadership roles that can be or are effective mentors. Supporting school-aged girls as early leaders in STEM, at the grass roots, can develop key skills that can support their careers long term.

In addition, it would help to create appropriate pressure on businesses to be proactive in supporting Women in STEM if current reporting requirements on workforce gender details are expanded to include details of gender diversity pay differences by agreed positions. To demonstrate effective leadership, the government should adopt a policy for all government-controlled agencies to report on the number of senior positions filled per year and how many were subject to open advertising and an "if not, why not" summary where advertising was not considered appropriate.

Positive role modelling is instrumental to build the aspirations of girls considering STEM as a pathway and women in the early stages of their career, as representation matters. The saying "You can't be what you can't see" can't be truer in the STEM which is highly male-dominated. Hence, introducing policies that ensure companies work towards achieving gender equality in leadership positions and have to report on gender ratios in their organisational leadership is critical to ensure transparency.

2. Create systems that eliminate recruitment bias.

Australia's STEM Workforce Report shows that there are only 29% of women working in the STEM labour force. The underrepresentation of women in STEM fields can be attributed to many factors, with recruitment bias being a major one. To address this, we recommend targeted-hiring practices to fix the imbalance.

Some suggestions include: interviewing from the women/diversity pool first, targeted recruitment calls for women-only positions, and having sufficient space in recruitment form to capture life circumstances that impact one's career and track record. These include moving countries (for migrants) and taking time out for parental and carer responsibilities.

Introduce policies that ensure mandatory diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training for panel members will mitigate recruitment bias. Rigorous reporting systems with an eye on various key decision-making steps will help cull bias. When a non-gendered language has been utilised and the focus is more on the skills being sought, it leads to better hiring processes and diverse applicants.

There should be ethical guidelines to avoid misleading perceptions about a role that may prevent certain groups from applying. For example, some technical roles include descriptions that do not reflect or clearly identify the skills necessary. This often results in reduced applications from women as statistics show that women would only apply for roles if they feel over 70% confident that they match the skill set required for the advertised role.

Inclusion is critical, too and businesses should review their DEI and hiring policies frequently to ensure proper induction and support for incoming staff. Stability is also key and repeated short-term contracts spell the death knell for many women leaving the workforce.

3. Introducing Policies that will lead to improved workplace culture.

Only one in 10 women with a STEM qualification continue working in the field after their degree. A major contributing factor to the high attrition rate for women in the STEM sector is poor workplace culture. Survey participants cited instances of discrimination ranging from gender, parenting, religion, race, and sexuality.

Recommendations include policy changes around funding (especially for those returning to work), flexible work arrangements, introducing programs that promote retention, on-site childcare, investing in DEI for organisation staff, and providing safe reporting measures besides HR to report discrimination practices.

Dedicated workplace DEI advocates of all genders who champion change is critical. Applications for grants and promotions should consider career trajectory without disadvantaging people for career breaks, this would go a long way to propelling career development.

We have also attached the detailed survey responses from the anonymous participants to this submission.

To find out more about our programs and how we are changing the narrative for women and girls in STEMM, visit our website or follow us on LinkedIn or Twitter.

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