



Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee

Inquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries

Template for Youth Associate final report to Committee

Name: Bianca Baldwin

Date: Monday 10th November 2025

Bio:

Bianca is a 27-year-old professional based in Melbourne's inner north. She works full-time in social policy and social inclusion, with a focus on improving equity and access for underrepresented communities. Drawing on her background in community engagement, Bianca is committed to amplifying the voices of young people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, particularly those navigating non-traditional industries such as construction. Her work aims to inform systems change through storytelling and grounded consultation with those directly impacted by barriers to inclusion.

Summary of consultations:

This report draws on 34 one-on-one interviews conducted in metropolitan Melbourne with participants aged 20–25. Eighteen identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and sixteen as culturally and linguistically diverse. All participants were either early-career workers, apprentices or recent graduates involved in or exploring the construction industry. Interviews were held individually to allow for open and confidential discussion. Participants were engaged through professional networks, peer recommendations and community contacts. The consultations explored the experiences, barriers, and opportunities for young people entering in-demand trades, with particular focus on the intersection of gender, culture and workplace safety.

Interview results: 1. Barriers for Women in Construction

- **Experiences:**
- Participants consistently described the construction industry as male-dominated, where women must continually prove their competence. Many reported subtle exclusion from site discussions, limited mentoring, and a culture that often prioritised physical strength over skill. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women also shared experiences of racial bias layered over gender inequality.
- **What's working well:**

- Some participants highlighted gradual change, with certain employers and supervisors actively encouraging female participation. Visibility of women in leadership roles was increasing, and government-supported apprenticeships were seen as positive entry points.
- **Problems or issues:**
- Many women still faced microaggressions, tokenism and a lack of safe spaces for reporting discrimination. Workwear and amenities often did not accommodate women, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants noted that cultural identity was sometimes dismissed or stereotyped, adding emotional pressure to “fit in.”
- **Solutions or recommendations:**
- Participants called for stronger policies promoting gender equity on-site, improved facilities, and targeted leadership development for women. They also emphasised the need for workplace training that challenges unconscious bias and normalises women’s visibility in all trade roles.

- **2. Cultural Safety and Inclusion**

Experiences:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants spoke of the challenge of bringing their full identity into the workplace. Many felt unable to express culture openly and described an expectation to leave it “at the gate.” CALD participants shared similar stories of cultural isolation, where humour or “banter” sometimes turned into casual racism.

Case Study: “Two Worlds on One Worksite”

“Some days I feel like I’m two different people - one that knows who she is and where she comes from, and another that has to leave that at the gate just to get through the day.”

This quote came from an Aboriginal woman in her early twenties who recently completed a pre-apprenticeship in construction. She described feeling proud of her work yet disconnected from her identity in a workplace that lacked cultural safety.

What’s working well:

- A small number of participants acknowledged supportive supervisors who showed genuine curiosity and respect for cultural learning. Reconciliation Action Plans and diversity statements were noted as positive first steps, even if inconsistently applied.

Problems or issues:

- The majority of participants viewed cultural inclusion as superficial. “Diversity without depth” was a common sentiment - workplaces were seen as compliant on paper but culturally unsafe in practice.

Solutions or recommendations:

- Participants recommended mandatory cultural safety training, on-site cultural awareness workshops delivered by community leaders, and the inclusion of cultural leave and flexible arrangements for community obligations. Many also advocated for dedicated Aboriginal liaison or diversity officers within large construction companies.

- **3. Living in Two Worlds**

Experiences:

- Participants described the mental and emotional challenge of navigating between two distinct worlds - their cultural or family environment and the professional norms of construction. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women spoke of the fatigue of code-switching and the feeling that their success required suppressing cultural identity. CALD participants often faced family expectations that clashed with their career choices.

What’s working well:

- Some participants found strength in peer networks of women and diverse tradespeople who shared similar experiences. Industry programs highlighting diversity and inclusion provided small but meaningful spaces for connection.

Problems or issues:

- Isolation remained common, especially for women in entry-level roles or on large worksites. Participants said the burden of representation — being “the only one” — could be emotionally draining.

Solutions or recommendations:

- Participants called for structured mentoring programs pairing young women with experienced tradeswomen, especially those from similar cultural backgrounds. They also recommended the creation of peer-led support networks within unions and training organisations.

4. Access to Mental Health and Psychological Safety**Experiences:**

- Several participants discussed the heavy emotional toll of working in a culture where vulnerability is stigmatised. Many said they “kept things to themselves” because the worksite did not feel psychologically safe. Discussions about stress or mental health were rare and often met with discomfort or dismissal.
- **What’s working well:**
- A few participants mentioned that larger employers were beginning to introduce mental health toolboxes and employee assistance programs, though awareness and accessibility remained limited.

Problems or issues:

- Participants described widespread fear of judgement, gossip, or job loss if they disclosed mental health struggles. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, the absence of culturally appropriate supports compounded these challenges. CALD participants noted that stigma and language barriers made it even harder to seek help.

Solutions or recommendations:

- Interviewees suggested embedding mental health and wellbeing modules into apprenticeships and inductions, ensuring supports are culturally competent and gender-sensitive. They also recommended normalising open discussion about mental health through leadership modelling and on-site peer champions.

5. Pathways and Opportunities

Experiences:

- Most participants had limited exposure to construction career options during school. Many said they “fell into” the field through friends or community connections rather than formal guidance.

What’s working well:

- Government initiatives and TAFE programs were praised for providing structured entry points, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students through targeted pre-apprenticeships.

Problems or issues:

- Awareness of these programs remained low, and some participants found application processes confusing or inaccessible. CALD participants expressed that information about trades pathways was not well promoted to families from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Solutions or recommendations:

- Participants advocated for stronger school-industry partnerships, early exposure to trade skills in secondary education, and visible role models from diverse communities. They also recommended investing in mentorship programs led by experienced Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and CALD women in construction.

AI Use Statement

This report was written by Bianca with assistance from AI drafting software (ChatGPT) to structure, edit and refine the final text. The content accurately reflects Bianca's consultations and the views shared by participants.