



Inclusive innovation playbook



ON
Innovation
Program



Australian
National
University

THE GLOBAL
INSTITUTE
FOR WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP

Wiyi YANI U
THANGANI
INSTITUTE
FOR FIRST NATIONS
GENDER JUSTICE

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This work was researched and written by a multi-disciplinary, collaborative team from CSIRO, GIWL, and WYUT.

Original artwork concept by Chloe Wegener.

Executive summary

This Playbook is designed to support a diverse, equitable and inclusive innovation ecosystem across Australia.

The first section covers the facts – from defining diversity, equity and inclusion, to why it matters to the innovation ecosystem – before outlining approaches to build shared understanding and support inclusive change.

Understanding your influence

Everyone has unique power to drive change. Your voice, decisions, and daily actions shape who gets to participate in innovation. This Playbook encourages reflection on your role and unique leverage points in the innovation ecosystem. Your influence is explored across:



Hearts and minds



Power and hierarchy



Systems and structures

Everybody has a role to play

Specific recommendations and examples are shared for three key groups in the sector.

1

Innovators:

Researchers, entrepreneurs and startups.

2

Programs:

Incubators, accelerators and innovation hubs.

3

Funders:

Venture capital funds (VCs), angels, philanthropists and government.

Throughout, you'll find practical checklists, ideas and reflective questions to help you in your journey. There are also recommended further readings, and information on how to get in contact.

No matter who you are or what you do, your influence can help transform the ecosystem. The flourishing of innovation in Australia is on all our shoulders.

About this Playbook

This Playbook is designed to support systemic change – both cultural and structural – across Australia’s innovation ecosystem.

Grounded in best practice and international and national research and co-created with stakeholders, the Playbook exists to inform, inspire and activate diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) across policy, programs and practices by:

Making visible the systemic barriers to inclusion



Mapping a shared pathway forward



Providing practical tools to support behaviour, culture and policy change

Your voice, decisions, and daily actions shape who gets to participate in innovation. This Roadmap, and accompanying Playbook, show how your influence can help transform Australia’s innovation ecosystem.

Playbook aims

This guiding resource seeks to:

- **Convert intention to action.**
Providing practical, actionable strategies to embed inclusion into innovation policies, programs and practices – moving beyond ambition into real-world implementation.
- **Provide tailored guidance for a diversity of roles.**
Whether you're shaping policy, designing programs, delivering services, or leading a team, the Playbook offers clear, role-specific tools and examples to guide your next steps.
- **Be adaptable.**
Built to be flexible and applicable across settings, sectors and scales – the tools, case studies and checklists can be adapted to your local context and priorities.
- **Contribute to resilient and valuable environments.**
Enhance the resilience and value of our innovation environments in which innovative thinking, planning and design are valued.
- **Empower change at every level.**
Inclusion is everyone's responsibility – and this Playbook helps individuals and organisations see what they can do now to create more equitable and impactful innovation environments.

This Playbook starts with the facts around DEI, strengthening confidence to champion inclusive practice, before exploring evidence-based actions and case studies for:

1 Researchers innovators and entrepreneurs

2 Incubators, accelerators and innovation hubs

3 Funders, policymakers, venture capitalists, philanthropists and government

Background

In 2025, CSIRO's ON Innovation Program (ON) initiated a collaboration with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) and the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice (WYUT) at the Australian National University. The purpose was to undertake an independent evaluation and co-design outputs to strengthen the program's diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) outcomes and inform future practice.

This Playbook and the accompanying Roadmaps are key outputs from ON's collaboration with GIWL and WYUT. They are now being shared with the broader innovation community to support inclusive practice and systemic change across the ecosystem.

About ON

The ON Innovation Program's vision is to unlock the power of publicly-funded Australian research to solve our biggest challenges.

Originally developed by CSIRO in 2015, ON has helped thousands of researchers take their technology from idea to impact. The program continues to develop, evolve and become more integrated into the innovation ecosystem.

Research translation delivers immense impact for society, innovation ecosystems and government stakeholders. For ON to succeed in its mission to help turn more research into real-world impact, its strategy must address diversity, equity and inclusion.

Critical to the ON Program's success is the delivery of an outstanding program experience for everyone – where each participant feels welcome, supported, and empowered in a space that's truly safe, inclusive, and accessible.

ON is proudly funded by the University Research Commercialisation Action Plan.

As such, key diversity, equity and inclusion gaps that this Playbook aims to address include:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples
- Gender
- Disability and neuro-divergence
- LGBTIQ+
- Cultural and ethnic diversity
- Location (metro vs rural)
- Accessibility for stakeholders with caring responsibilities

How the Playbook was developed

This Playbook is evidence-based and was created following:

A systemic review of global and national evidence



Co-design workshops with CSIRO, GIWL and WYUT

In-depth qualitative and quantitative data collection through a survey and interviews



Know the facts

DEI in Australia's innovation system



What is diversity, equity and inclusion?

Diversity, equity and inclusion work together to create environments where everyone can participate fully and authentically.

This approach recognises and responds to intersecting identities, strengths and diverse ways of knowing, helping to correct historic and contemporary injustices.

Transforming the innovation ecosystem in Australia – and globally – is imperative. Significant segments of the population remain excluded or unequally able to contribute to innovation, the effects of which are felt across society and the economy.

Supercharging innovation ecosystems requires leadership that cultivates a culture of safety and respect – one that actively dismantles colonial, racist, ableist, and patriarchal beliefs. These systems marginalise and undermine people's diverse identities and lived experiences, rather than reflecting and supporting them.

In the innovation ecosystem, this means:

Diversity

Diversity recognises and values the full spectrum of human difference and experience. True diversity acknowledges that different identity markers, forms of knowledge, perceptions and ways of being enhance both individual and collective innovation potential.

Equity

Equity addresses systemic barriers and structural discriminations that prevent equal participation, experiences, treatment and outcomes.

This goes beyond equal treatment, working instead toward fair outcomes based on inherent differences, recognising that people begin from unequal starting points due to historical and ongoing advantages and disadvantages.

Inclusion

Inclusion creates a culture where all individuals feel respected, valued, and empowered to fully participate, regardless of their background or identity. It is underpinned by care and respect of differences, and the understanding that diversity intrinsically strengthens our shared future.

Intersectionality

An intersectional approach is taken throughout this Playbook. This recognises how different demographic features intersect to impact the nature and magnitude of barriers to participation in and engagement with the innovation ecosystem.

The wheel of power and marginalisation¹ reflects how power is typically distributed across key demographic features.

It provides a quick way to begin to understand factors that may smooth the path for some people's experience in the innovation ecosystem, while presenting challenges for others.

Importantly, an intersectional approach is a holistic, well-rounded strategy. Fully tapping into these layered identity markers can offer rich perspectives that can hold the greatest solutions for dismantling prejudicial systems and constructing more freeing, powerful and enabling environments.

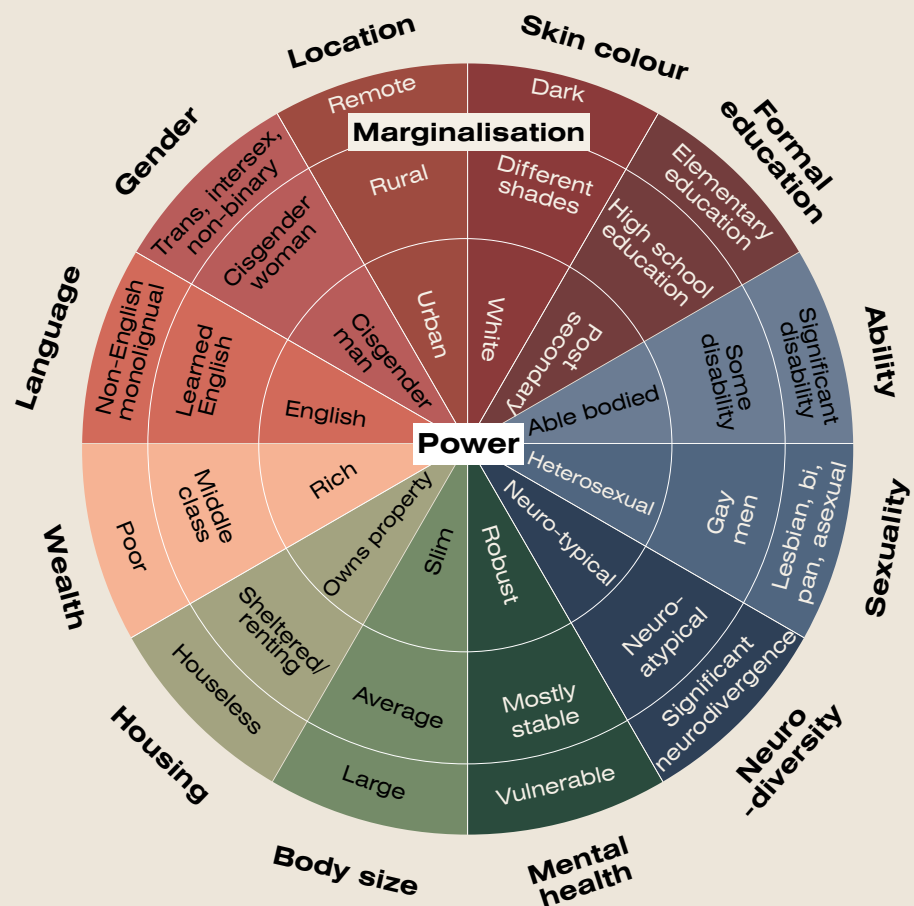


Figure 1 shows a circular diagram illustrating power and marginalisation across different demographic features.



Why does DEI matter in the innovation ecosystem?

Everyone deserves the opportunity to innovate and create our shared future.

When we exclude individuals and communities from innovation, we perpetuate systems that limit potential and deny people their right to contribute their unique perspectives and solutions. We also miss business and impact opportunities, hamstringing our innovation and growth potential.

The innovation ecosystem has the power to shape how we live, work and solve society's biggest challenges. If the ecosystem isn't diverse, equitable and inclusive, the solutions it creates won't work for everyone.

Australia has an increasingly diverse population and innovation that doesn't reflect this diversity leaves us all worse off – both those working in the ecosystem and the broader community who benefit from it. This matters, particularly as diversity, equity and inclusion can help strengthen Australia's innovation output in the global market.

Founding team gender composition among 394 startups in 2024.²

45%
all men

19%
all women

35%
mixed gender

The gender gap in our innovation ecosystem

Increasing the representation of women is a growth opportunity that will accelerate innovation impact.

Women make up just over half of Australia's population and now represent 50% of academics in the research sector.³ Yet their representation across the innovation pipeline remains at odds with these facts, particularly in startup leadership.

In Australia's startup sector, gender composition of founding teams in 2024 shows: 45% all-men teams, 19% all-women teams, 35% mixed-gender teams, and 1% other, noting that the majority of teams comprise 1 to 2 individuals.⁴

Closing this gap is an opportunity to unlock untapped talent and new ideas, strengthen leadership diversity and accelerate innovation outcomes across every sector.

The benefits of DEI

The benefits of DEI *extend to everyone.*

The Diversity Council of Australia (DCA)'s Inclusion@Work Index⁵ shows that employees in inclusive teams experience dramatically better outcomes.

Employees in inclusive teams are:

x6

more likely to feel work positively affects mental health

x2

more likely to receive useful feedback

x8

more likely to be very satisfied than workers in non-inclusive teams

x3

less likely to leave their organisation

Inclusive organisations are:

x10

more likely to be innovative

x4

more likely to provide excellent customer service

x8

more likely to work together effectively

x2.5

more likely to be willing to work extra hard to help their team succeed

When we create inclusive environments, innovation thrives.

Research consistently shows that inclusive organisations outperform their peers.

The cost of exclusion

Meanwhile, current systems are failing people and limiting potential.

Systemic barriers affect different people in different ways and these often intersect and compound for those with multiple marginalised identities. The evidence shows how much we're missing.

- **While women lead 38% of small and medium enterprises**, only 22% of startups are founded by women. Women are also 20% more likely to start businesses out of necessity rather than opportunity.⁶
 - **Across member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 60% of 'missing entrepreneurs' are women**—people who would start businesses under equal conditions.⁷
 - **Roughly one in five Australians live with a disability.**⁸ People with disabilities have higher entrepreneurship rates compared to those without disability (13.1% vs 9.2%), yet remain largely excluded from innovation funding and support networks.⁹
 - **A growing proportion of Australians identify as First Nations** (roughly 3.8% of the population). First Nations entrepreneurs bring culturally grounded motivations but face systemic exclusion from mainstream innovation ecosystems. Indigenous owners are likely to employ 30 times more Indigenous people than those with non-Indigenous owners — a missed opportunity for the broader innovation ecosystem.¹⁰
 - **Over one quarter of Australians were born overseas**, and more than half have at least one parent born overseas.¹¹
- There is enormous untapped talent and ambition across all communities. The opportunity lies in building funding, networking and entrepreneurial systems that can harness and support everyone's potential.**

The strongest innovation ecosystem will be one that recognises innovation is fundamentally about human problem-solving and creativity – and that comes from all of us. Different viewpoints and experiences drive more creative solutions, better problem-solving and innovations that *work for everyone*.

Barriers to embracing DEI

While 75% of Australian workers support DEI, a small but growing share (7%) oppose it.¹²

Understanding these perspectives helps us respond more effectively and build more inclusive environments for innovation. In this section, we outline common sources that can contribute to resistance around DEI.

Fear-based resistance

Resistance often stems from fear of change or perceived threats among dominant groups.¹³

Research identifies three main sources¹⁴

1

Status threat

zero-sum thinking where gains by marginalised groups feel like losses for the majority.

2

Merit threat

belief that DEI challenges the idea that success comes purely from individual effort.

3

Moral threat

discomfort acknowledging personal or group privilege.

Contributing factors include:

- **Economic uncertainty.** DEI initiatives are often being deprioritised as non-essential.¹⁵
- **DEI fatigue.** Messaging outpacing visible progress creates scepticism.¹⁶
- **Politicisation.** Conservative framing of DEI as divisive rather than inclusive.¹⁷
- **Implementation concerns.** Frustration with superficial practices that don't deliver meaningful change.¹⁸

DEI in Australia

The discourse around DEI backlash centres predominantly on gender, with less attention paid to race, sexuality, disability and their intersection.

The *Everyday Respect* report documented instances of backlash, resistance and retaliation, highlighting patterns including perceptions of 'reverse discrimination', feelings of being undervalued due to diversity initiatives, and concerns about perceived preferential treatment.¹⁹

Innovation ecosystem context

The startup and innovation ecosystem may be especially susceptible to DEI backlash due to several factors:

- **Meritocracy culture.** Strong emphasis on merit-based achievement can lead some to perceive DEI initiatives as undermining equal opportunity principles.
- **Environment constraints.** Fast-paced, resource-constrained environments where DEI may be seen as impractical.
- **Ingroup biases.** Investors tend to support entrepreneurs who share similar background – an unconscious preference that inadvertently disadvantages women, LGBTIQ+ individuals and people of colour.²⁰



Remember

Backlash often signals meaningful progress when entrenched power structures are challenged.

Addressing concerns around DEI

Evidence shows that anticipating aversion and responding proactively with inclusive approaches is most effective.²¹

1. Anticipate and name resistance.

Understand that backlash is likely and learn to identify how it manifests.²²

2. Integrate pre-emptive myth-busting.

Address common misconceptions before they take hold using the fact-myth-fallacy-response framework: present the fact, then the myth and debunking, followed by explanation of how the fallacy distorts the fact, concluding with clear response.²³

3. Present multiple cases for DEI.

Don't rely solely on business arguments—combine approaches:

- **Business case.** Inclusive organisations are 6x more innovative, 2x more likely to meet targets.²⁴
- **People case.** Inclusive teams show 10x higher job satisfaction, 4x better mental health.²⁵
- **Values case.** Frame as fairness, dignity and social responsibility – an ethical and moral responsibility.²⁶

4. Use storytelling and lived experience.

Personal narratives are powerful tools for reducing defensiveness and humanising DEI work. Storytelling tends to connect better than facts alone.²⁷

5. Adopt an invitational, voluntary tone.

Use language that invites participation and collaboration. An emphasis on shared goals and universal values is less likely to be contentious or polarising.²⁸ The values of benevolence, universalism and self-direction are most associated with non-discrimination and equality.²⁹

6. Create feedback mechanisms.

Design channels for open dialogue and feedback to foster trust and responsiveness. Provide safe spaces where people can express their beliefs, concerns and questions without fear of judgement.³⁰ The process of listening can itself be transformative, especially when resistance stems from fear or uncertainty.

7. Encourage values-based reflection.

Reflection helps organisations and individuals examine their values, identities and the systemic dynamics at play. This form of values-aligned inquiry creates space for honest and open reflection and deeper commitment to change.

8. Use inclusive engagement tools.

Draw on pull-outs from this Playbook alongside 'additional resources',³¹ including sample interview questions tailored to different ecosystem actors.

9. Include bias-interruption tools.

Given the influence of unconscious bias in investment and funding decisions, draw on tools (such as in this Playbook) to help stakeholders recognise and interrupt bias in selection, assessment and decision-making processes.



Your role in the innovation ecosystem

Before diving into actions, understand your unique position and influence in Australia's innovation ecosystem.

Everyone has a role to play, but your specific sphere of influence determines where you can make the most effective change. This Playbook provides tailored guidance for three key ecosystem roles:

**For innovators:
researchers,
entrepreneurs and
startups**

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**For programs:
incubators,
accelerators and
innovation hubs**

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**For funders: VCs,
angels, philanthropists
and government**

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As broad context for the recommendations, success means:

1. Taking an **integrated approach** to diversity, equity and inclusion, rather than relying on piecemeal initiatives.³²
2. Knowing that a **'fix systems approach'** reinforces the need for organisational, structural and cultural change rather than individualistic approaches to increasing diversity.
3. Committing to meaningful change, requiring **sustained effort** over prolonged periods.³³

Therefore, this Playbook speaks to systems change by transforming systems and identifying levers for action.

Each person's influence and leverage points are unique. Understanding your place in the ecosystem first will help you identify how to effectively make change as you step through this Playbook.



Take a moment to reflect

Where do you sit in the innovation ecosystem?

Understanding your position isn't about hierarchy – it's about identifying where you have the power to make change happen.

Every person, in every role, has unique opportunities to influence who gets to participate in innovation. Drawing from the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice,³¹ your sphere of influence operates across three levels:



1 Hearts and minds

Transforming worldviews, narratives and assumptions

This is where you can shift the stories we tell about innovation, who belongs and what success looks like. Your influence here includes:

- **The language you use when framing innovation.** What assumptions do you reinforce or challenge in conversations?
- **The stories you amplify.** Whose success stories do you share? What narratives do you platform?
- **The advocacy and thought leadership you provide.** How do you use your voice to shift mindsets?
- **The language and imagery you use.** What does 'innovation' look like in your communications?
- **The training and education you provide or influence.** What worldviews are you helping to shape?
- **The research questions and framing you choose.** What problems are defined as worth solving?

2 Power and relationships

Changing power dynamics and who gets to participate

This is where you can shift who has influence, whose voices are heard and who gets to shape decisions. Your influence here includes:

- **Who holds decision-making power in your work.** Do you share authority or maintain control? Who gets to lead projects and set directions?
- **Whose expertise and knowledge you value and centre.** What types of knowledge count as valid? Who gets listened to when problems need solving?
- **How you redistribute access to opportunities and resources.** Who gets connected to diverse stakeholders, funding, platforms and career advancement through your networks?
- **The power dynamics you challenge or reinforce.** Do you speak up when marginalised voices are dismissed? How do you use your position of power?
- **Who gets visibility and credit for contributions.** Whose work gets recognised? Who gets to represent the team or organisation?
- **How you shift traditional hierarchies and gatekeeping.** What barriers to participation do you remove? How do you make space for different ways of contributing?

3 Structures

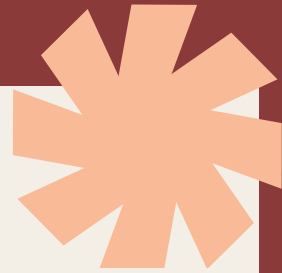
Shifting laws, policies, practices and resource flows

This is where you can change the formal systems that either enable or constrain diverse participation. Your influence here includes:

- **Funding criteria and investment decisions.** What assumptions shape your 'good investment' checklist?
- **Organisational policies and procedures.** What systems need updating to reflect inclusive values?
- **Program design and delivery approaches.** Whose needs are centred in your design process?
- **Government policy and regulation you influence.** Which policies enable or constrain diverse participation?
- **Industry standards and practices you help set.** How can professional norms evolve to be more inclusive?
- **Resource allocation and budget decisions.** How are resources distributed? Who benefits?

DEI in action

case study example



Example: CSIRO's ON Innovation Program website showcases intentionality in language.

At ON, our vision is to unlock the power of Australian research to solve our biggest challenges. The ON Program fast-tracks Australia's most promising research breakthroughs into real-world impact.

Our mission is to empower every publicly funded researcher in Australia, from every background – to confidently explore pathways beyond academia by connecting them to world-class programs, expert resources and an inclusive community.

Through tailored experiences and practical support, ON helps researchers build the skills, networks and mindset needed to navigate commercialisation, collaboration or other avenues for research translation. At ON, inclusion is foundational. We are committed to creating a culture where everyone feels welcome, valued and supported. Our programs actively reflect the diversity of Australia's research talent and are designed to ensure equitable access to opportunities. We know innovation flourishes when different perspectives are heard and embraced.

Since its launch in 2015, the ON Program has delivered training and support to thousands of people, creating a legacy and vibrant community of researchers, founders, industry experts, advisors and investors that participants can lean into. Whether you're curious about creating impact or have bold founder ambitions, ON exists for all researchers ready to take their leap to something more.

Understanding

Your unique leverage points

Now that you've identified your sphere/s of influence, consider:

- **Where is your influence strongest?** Focus your initial efforts where you have the most direct control and decision-making power.
- **What changes would have the biggest ripple effect?** Think about actions that would influence others to also change their practices.
- **Where do you face the most resistance?** Understanding barriers helps you plan more effective change strategies.
- **Who else shares your sphere of influence?** Identify potential allies and collaborators in your ecosystem role.
- **What unique assets do you bring?** Your lived experience, professional credibility, networks and resources create distinctive opportunities that others might not have.

Systems thinking

Your most powerful change happens when you work across all three elements simultaneously. Real transformation occurs when changes reinforce each other across the system.

Example in action: A research leader changes their hiring criteria to value diverse forms of expertise (structural), shifts decision-making power by including community voices in research priority-setting and giving diverse team members leadership roles in key projects (relational). They also use their platform at conferences to challenge assumptions about whose knowledge counts as 'rigorous' or 'innovative' (hearts and minds).

Each action amplifies the others — shared power generates new insights that challenge traditional narratives, which makes it easier to justify inclusive policies, which creates space for more power-sharing.

Your integration opportunity

What would it look like if you connected your structural influence (policies, budgets, criteria) with your relational influence (who has decision-making power, whose voices are centred) and your narrative influence (how you speak about expertise and success)?

Multiple roles Multiple opportunities

Many people wear multiple hats in the innovation ecosystem. If you identify with several roles:

- **Start with your primary role** where you have the most influence.
- **Look for connections** between your different positions.
- **Leverage your unique perspective** from multiple vantage points.
- **Become a bridge** between different parts of the ecosystem.
- **Use your diverse networks** to share learning and coordinate actions across sectors.



Remember

Only you have this unique combination of roles and relationships — use them to drive change others cannot.

DEI in action

activate your best practice

The story I will start telling differently

Hearts and minds

The relational dynamic I'm ready to shift

Power and hierarchy

What I can change this month

Systems and structures



Measurement, evaluation and learning

As highlighted in the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Change Agenda, “Numbers alone can often be inaccurate, and tell us little about how we live our lives”.³⁴

Creating lasting change requires ongoing measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL). Moving beyond traditional metrics to understand real impact means:

- **Listening for signals, not just counting indicators.** Traditional indicators might tell you 40% of program participants are women. Signals—those things we see, hear, sense and feel—help you understand whether those women feel genuinely supported, included and able to contribute their best work.
- **Creating feedback loops that drive continuous improvement.** The most inclusive programs and policies are those that adapt based on what they learn from the communities they serve. Evidence shows that programs often fail to understand the unique challenges facing diverse entrepreneurs and lack the feedback loops necessary for improving practices.³⁵
- **Recognising that inclusion is a practice, not a destination.** Effective MEL helps you understand when practices that worked in one context need adjustment for different communities or changing circumstances.

MEL signals check

What are signals?

Signals are the things we see, feel, hear and sense in our environment. Unlike traditional metrics, signals are about lived experiences and how change feels to those experiencing it.

How does DEI look, feel, sound and sense like in your environment?

This may include things such as:

- Meetings where different communication styles are welcomed equally.
- People with caring responsibilities feeling supported to participate flexibly.
- First Nations knowledge being valued equally alongside Western expertise.
- People feeling safe to disagree or challenge ideas without fear of exclusion.

Monthly practice

- **Notice these signals** in your meetings, events, programs, or policies.
- **Ask** “What signals suggest our environment is becoming more inclusive?”.
- **Listen** especially to those who have been excluded – their signals matter most.
- **Try one small change** based on a signal that suggests something isn’t working.
- **Check back** next month to see if different signals emerge.



Remember

The people closest to challenges often see solutions others miss. Seek out diverse perspectives, especially from those who’ve faced barriers.

Ready to Take action?

The innovation ecosystem has the opportunity for great transformation and you are part of making it happen.

Your choices shape who gets to participate in building Australia's future.

Jump to the section that best matches your primary role in the ecosystem, but don't stop there. The most effective change-makers understand how their role connects to others and work across boundaries to create systemic transformation.

Your sphere of influence – no matter how big or small – is *your platform for change*.

Researchers,
entrepreneurs
and startups

Innovators

Your role in creating
inclusive innovation

You're solving tomorrow's problems today – but you're also shaping how innovation happens.

Whether you are leading research, building a startup or developing new technologies, your daily choices about how you work, what approaches you value and how you structure collaboration determine whether innovation systems are inclusive or exclusionary.

This matters because inclusive teams consistently produce better outcomes. Yet innovation often relies on narrow approaches and traditional methods.

These familiar ways of thinking systematically exclude different perspectives, problem-solving styles and ways of knowing.

When you design flexible work practices, value diverse forms of expertise and create accessible ways for people to participate, you're not just being fair – you're unlocking innovation potential that rigid systems miss.

Your influence extends far beyond your immediate work.

Innovation thrives when systems accommodate different working styles, learning approaches and life circumstances.

When you implement inclusive practices – from accessible meeting formats to flexible participation options to valuing different types of contributions – you’re creating environments where breakthrough thinking can emerge from anyone.

Other innovators follow your lead, meaning your inclusive systems ripple throughout the entire ecosystem.

Your experience can unlock transformation.

Reflect on your journey: what systems supported or hindered your success?

Now you have the power to design approaches that work for everyone. Your current influence – whether you’re structuring your first project or leading a major initiative – is your platform for creating innovation systems where anyone can contribute their best work.

Evidence-based

Actions you can take to contribute to DEI

A word on words

Sex refers to a person's biological and physiological characteristics, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs and usually uses terminology like male, female or intersex.

Gender is a social and cultural construct referring to the roles, behaviours, expectations and identities associated with being masculine, feminine, beyond the binary, or neither. As such, using gender terminology is more appropriate in most circumstances, referring to men, women, non-binary and trans individuals, for instance (rather than female, male, etc.).



Remember

You are a leader in the innovation ecosystem.

You have the opportunity not just to meet minimum legal requirements, but to set the standard for best practice that others will follow. You have a role in determining the destiny of your organisation and who wants to work with and for you!

1 Lead with inclusive staffing and team building practices

When you're building your team, traditional approaches often rely on existing networks and narrow definitions of who 'fits' in innovation.

This inadvertently excludes talented people who could bring breakthrough perspectives to your work. As leaders in the innovation ecosystem, you're in a unique position; while meeting minimum legal requirements (like Positive Duty under the Sex Discrimination Act)³⁶ is essential, you have the opportunity to set industry-leading standards that others will follow.

Your leadership actions

- **Build diverse teams from day one.** Actively embed diversity within and across teams through clear guidelines. Research shows diverse teams consistently outperform homogeneous ones when tackling complex problems.
- **Diversity will add value** to your team by bringing in different perspectives you might not otherwise hear.
- **Set ambitious DEI targets.** Consider gender parity goals, such as 40–60% of team members identifying as women, and pursue diversity across backgrounds, experiences and perspectives. Diversity will add value to your team by bringing in different perspectives you might not otherwise hear.
- **Rethink your language.** Research shows that broader language around innovation success attracts researchers from diverse disciplines and backgrounds. This includes emphasising social impact and community benefit alongside traditional metrics, which appeals to those who may prioritise social change over unicorn companies.³⁷

Normalising the usage of pronouns in email signatures and avatar profile titles is also important. Prioritise using people's preferred pronouns and advocate for this if you are aware of someone being misgendered.

2 Expand your definition of innovation success

If you only measure success through traditional startup metrics like profit and scale, you might miss innovations that create the most meaningful impact.

Different people are motivated by different visions of success and your definition shapes who feels welcome in your work.

Your leadership actions

- **Broaden your success metrics.** Include social value, community benefit and environmental impact alongside traditional financial measures.
- **Recognise different motivations.** Understand that First Nations entrepreneurs often prioritise community-based economic development over individual enterprise,³⁸ and women are 20% more likely to cite necessity rather than opportunity as their motivation.³⁹
- **Partner with communities.** Work with community organisations to understand real-world impact and applications of your innovations.
- **Embed your values.** Make social impact and positive change explicit goals in your project development, not just nice-to-have outcomes.

Perceptions signals check

How might expanding your definition of success attract collaborators with different motivations and lived experiences?



3 Foster inclusive networks

The way you network and build professional relationships can either open doors or create barriers for others. Traditional entrepreneurial networks tend to be exclusive and transactional,

which particularly affects people who prefer relationship-building approaches. Research shows these networks are crucial for innovators' sustainable engagement and long-term success.⁴⁰

Your leadership actions

- **Build relationships, not just transactions.** Emphasise meaningful connections over purely transactional networking – research shows women entrepreneurs particularly value relationship-building approaches.⁴¹
- **Create critical mass.** Foster peer networks where people aren't the only representative of their background, being the 'token' person from a group isn't sustainable or effective.
- **Engage external networks.** Connect with organisations supporting underrepresented groups (e.g. Tech Diversity).
- **Address mentorship and role model gaps.** Help connect people with mentors and role models who share similar lived experiences and actively mentor people from underrepresented groups yourself, where appropriate, regardless of your own background.

While research shows shared values, attainability and 'looking like' those you are seeking to support is particularly important,⁴² everyone should share the responsibility of supporting diverse innovators rather than leaving it only to people from those communities.

4 Practice active allyship to other innovators

Individual efforts alone won't create systemic change. The barriers facing underrepresented innovators are structural and require collective action to address.

Research shows that meaningful change requires sustained effort over time and that organisational approaches are more effective than individual actions alone.⁴³

Your leadership actions

- **Use your platform.** Actively elevate underrepresented entrepreneurs and researchers through your networks, speaking opportunities and professional platforms.
- **Speak up against bias.** Challenge exclusionary practices or unconscious bias when you see it in professional settings – your voice as an established innovator carries weight.
- **Advocate for systemic change.** Support policy and practice changes that benefit the broader innovation ecosystem, recognising that structural approaches are more effective than individual actions alone.
- **Co-create rather than lead.** When working on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, ensure underrepresented voices are leading the conversation, not just participating.
- **Share funding opportunities.** Actively share grants, pitch opportunities and investment leads to entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups.
- **Move beyond performative gestures to real allyship.** Performative allyship may be easier and involve relatively costless actions, however it infrequently challenges the status quo. Engaging in performative allyship may have a negative impact not only on those groups you seek to show solidarity with, but also on allies.⁴⁴

5 Implement flexible and inclusive organisational practices

The way you structure your work – timing, location, communication styles, participation requirements – determines who can meaningfully contribute. Rigid structures systematically exclude people

with caring responsibilities, different working styles, or accessibility needs, even when these people could bring valuable expertise to your projects.

Your leadership actions

- **Make timing work for everyone.** Schedule key activities outside school hours, consider school holidays, take into consideration cultural and religious days and provide alternative ways to participate when people can't attend in real-time. Research also shows flexibility is crucial for entrepreneurial mothers.⁴⁵
- **Multiple participation modes.** Offer different ways to engage with work and decision-making. This may include alternative ways of 'pitching' (verbal, written, pre-recorded, etc.) or engaging with learning materials (e.g. online vs in-person and on demand).
- **Design for accessibility.** Consider physical accessibility, assistive technology, clear communication styles and sensory accommodations in your work environment. Adopting 'Universal Design Principles' can help everyone.
- **Support all types of care.** Acknowledge that people have diverse caring responsibilities – including childcare, elder care, disability care. First Nations people may also have cultural responsibilities for extended family, community and Country.
- **Learn from First Nations knowledge systems.** Understand how First Nations approaches to innovation, collaboration and knowledge-sharing can inform more inclusive work practices. Consider how connection to Country and community-centred decision-making could reshape your organisational structure.



Remember

While competition is a part of innovation, fostering a culture that 'raises all boats' recognises that respect, understanding where others come from and how their success contributes to your success is also critical to a thriving innovation ecosystem.

Reflection questions

Before implementing these actions, take a moment to reflect:



What unique perspectives are missing from your innovation work?

How can you use your position to create opportunities for others?

What systemic barriers can you help address through your leadership?

DEI in action

case study example



Example: Jane's experience in an innovation program

Jane is a senior research scientist with an entrepreneurial bent. She is used to being the only woman in a male-dominated STEM field. She recognises that a lack of visible role models and senior women in the field impacts the pipeline of more junior women. This can mean she often feels singled out in innovation settings:

"I don't have a single senior queer woman older than me that I can think of."

Jane participated in an incubator/accelerator program with a deliberately gender and age balanced team, assembled by her director. This had a huge positive impact for Jane, in feeling seen and represented.

However, among her colleagues and others taking part in the program, Jane found that loud and more senior voices were drowning out those who were closest to the problem.

"The innovation space is often dominated by certain personalities and age groups who don't realise they're talking over everyone else... In one meeting, a senior colleague spoke as the authority even

when we were in my area of expertise. Afterward, when it was raised, he was mortified once he realised."

What would have helped most, Jane says, are clear expectations and tools baked into programs and shared among teams: guidance on team composition (like how organisations already require gender-balanced interview panels), plus practical coaching on running inclusive customer discovery interviews – inviting quieter voices, curbing dominance and sharing turns. That kind of structure would have made the required user-testing and customer discovery phase far more effective and less taxing on under-represented teammates.

"We do it for interview panels; we can do it for teams. Give us simple norms for running [customer discovery interviews] – how to share the talking, how to bring in the quieter person, how to shut down dominance kindly. And it shouldn't be up to the marginalised person to educate those in positions of privilege."

Incubators,
accelerators and
innovation hubs

Programs

You shape the
future of innovation

**You're building tomorrow's
innovation leaders and have the
unique power to determine who gets
to participate in building our future.**

As program leaders, your influence extends far beyond your individual cohorts. You set ecosystem standards that ripple throughout Australia's innovation landscape.

Your reputation and impact matter.

You run programs where delivering a good participant experience is fundamental to your success.

In an increasingly connected world, communities and society expect high standards of diversity and inclusion, and you have the opportunity to not just meet these expectations, but to lead the way.

Your ecosystem obligation.

Reflect on your responsibility to the innovation ecosystem more broadly.

You're not just running programs – you're shaping talent retention, learning from failure, building on success and ultimately determining what kind of Australia we become. When you create inclusive environments, you attract better applicants, develop stronger startups and build more valuable networks.

Your competitive advantage.

In an increasingly flooded innovation ecosystem, how do you set yourself apart?

Previous innovation approaches won't keep pace with emerging needs and expectations. Leading on inclusion isn't just the right thing to do, it's your strategic advantage in attracting the best talent and creating the most innovative solutions.

Evidence-based **Actions you can take** to contribute to DEI

Surface-level inclusivity statements like 'Anyone can succeed here!' aren't enough.⁴⁶

To create genuinely inclusive programs, you need sustained effort that addresses specific intersectional needs of entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds.⁴⁷

This means moving beyond generic signals to implementing concrete practices that recognise how different people experience barriers and opportunities in innovation.

1 Transform outreach, selection and recruitment practices

Traditional recruitment approaches often rely on existing networks and narrow definitions of who 'fits' in innovation, inadvertently excluding talented people who could bring breakthrough perspectives to your programs. Research shows that

gender-neutral recruitment can perpetuate inequality, and that there is often a lack of transparency in selection processes affecting women's participation.⁴⁸

Your leadership actions

- **Language innovation.** For instance, shifting away from exclusive 'deep tech' terminology towards more inclusive language like 'research translation' and 'innovation impact' can help attract broader disciplines and skillsets. Present alternative views of venture success, including community benefit and social change.⁴⁹
- **Transparent recruitment.** Challenge existing investment biases and recruitment practices that perpetuate inequality. Introduce proactive measures such as targets for shortlisting underrepresented groups.⁵⁰ Ensure activities are widely promoted and can reach a more diverse audience. Consider if mandatory requirements are exclusionary. Call out that applications from diverse peoples are welcome in listings.
- **Diversify application methods.** Provide alternative modes of application (written, verbal, video, project-based) to accommodate various abilities and strengths.
- **Set inclusion targets.** Consider including targets for gender parity, such as having between 40–60% of participants identifying as women and aim for intersectional diversity across regional residence, disability experience and cultural backgrounds. For guidance on targets, check out resources like the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's target setting toolkit.
- **Strategic outreach.** Actively advertise through organisations supporting underrepresented groups and encourage people to nominate diverse candidates. Recognise that it may take more time to gain a more diverse cohort and build this into your activities. Under-representation starts early, for instance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are under-represented in school completion rates, through to university graduation and employment in research and innovation roles. Addressing under-representation is therefore not solely the responsibility of innovation programs, with society more broadly and education systems also playing a critical role. However, as a highly significant and high-profile part of the pipeline, the innovation ecosystem may play an out-sized role in showing under-represented groups what's possible for their future.

2 Design accessible and inclusive programming

Standard program design often assumes participants have similar availability and support needs, inadvertently excluding the diverse talent pool that drives breakthrough innovation. Research shows flexible delivery

accommodating different needs is crucial for accessibility and neurodivergent entrepreneurs place significant hope in accelerators to address their specific challenges.⁵¹

Your leadership actions

- **Prioritise flexible delivery.** Schedule activities outside school pick-up and drop-off hours and provide alternative participation options. Offer multiple ways to complete assignments and participate in activities. Where possible, record program sessions and share them afterwards, allowing participants to catch up and engage with content at a time that suits them.
- **Design for neurodivergence.** Create consistent weekly patterns with explicit instructions and structured approaches. Neurodivergent entrepreneurs place significant hope in accelerators to address their specific challenges, particularly in acquiring skills compatible with their learning processes.⁵² Traditional 'learn by doing' experiential approaches may present difficulties for neurodivergent learners who typically require more structure and explicit instruction.⁵³
- **Ensure comprehensive accessibility.** Include physical venues, assistive technology, sensory accommodations and frequent breaks. Design the program environment to include opportunities for movement and multiple communication modes.⁵⁴ It can also be helpful to communicate the schedule and planned break times in advance to assist participants with planning their needs. If changes must be made, communicate these as early as possible. When break times commence, state the length of the break and the expected time the session will resume. Where possible, communicate this verbally and in writing (e.g. in a group message forum) along with any instructions. Provide a reminder to come back to the session ahead of the scheduled time.
- **Provide multi-purpose inclusive spaces.** For in-person programs, provide access to a private space that can be used as a parent's room or a quiet area for prayer, meditation, and respite from high-sensory environments. Ensuring the space has features like dimmable lighting, a sink, microwave and fridge will mean it meets several needs. Let participants know about the availability and location of this space in advance to best support neurodiverse, cultural, spiritual, and caregiving needs.
- **Expand care support.** Be responsive to caring responsibilities, including listening to what support your cohort might need. Consider offering childcare options and expanding definitions of care to encompass disability, child, aged and kinship care, including First Nations cultural obligations for caring for family, community and Country.⁵⁵ Founders are likely to experience pressure that can impact their mental health. Consider extending access to Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services to participants for the duration of their program, and provide access to certified Mental Health Champions. These supports can help raise awareness, reduce stigma, and foster psychological safety – particularly for those from underrepresented or marginalised backgrounds who may face additional barriers or stressors.
- **Use Universal Design for Learning.** Deliver content through visual, audio and textual means to accommodate different learning styles. Provide multiple possible modes of assignment completion, such as written, spoken, or drawn submissions.⁵⁶

- **Engage with Traditional Owners.** Partner with local Aboriginal Land Councils to provide Welcome to Country when delivering programs on their Country. If considering incorporating

First Nations language, work with local Indigenous language centres to understand cultural protocols and seek appropriate permissions.

3 Build diverse leadership, role models and mentorship

Who you choose to lead, mentor and represent your program sends powerful messages about who truly belongs in innovation. Homogeneous leadership teams inadvertently signal that innovation is only for certain types of people.

Engaging and compensating experts from marginalised groups ensures relevant perspectives are included within programs and diverse representation at all organisational levels is critical.⁵⁷

Your leadership actions

- **Recruit diverse staff and mentors.** Ensure diverse representation at all levels—staff, administrators, mentors, advisors and board members. Involve people from underrepresented groups in program design and governance. For regional programs, engage with entrepreneurs in regional and remote areas to prioritise program design focused on their needs and community development, embracing regional uniqueness instead of attempting to replicate urban models.⁵⁸
- **Compensate diverse experts.** Pay fair rates for expertise from underrepresented groups rather than expecting free ‘diversity’ labour.⁵⁹
- **Create critical mass.** Foster peer networks where people aren’t the only representative of their background – being the ‘token’ person isn’t sustainable or effective.
- **Invest in ongoing DEI training.** Provide regular diversity, equity and inclusion training for all staff and mentors to build cultural confidence. Training staff and program stakeholders can increase their capacity to adjust program design and mentoring to meet different participants’ needs.⁶⁰

- **Address mentorship gaps.**
Connect participants with mentors who understand their specific challenges.⁶¹ Avoid placing the entire burden of diversity mentorship on people from underrepresented groups – all experienced entrepreneurs should mentor across difference.
- **Meet and go beyond compliance.**
It's important to be aware of your duties under the new Respect@Work Positive Duty legislation. This legal obligation requires organisations and leaders to proactively take steps to prevent unlawful conduct (e.g. hostile work cultures, sexual harassment), rather than just reacting to incidents after they occur.



What does Positive Duty under the Sex Discrimination Act mean for the innovation ecosystem?

What's new?

From December 2022, all Australian businesses must proactively prevent sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation—not just respond to complaints.

Who's affected?

Everyone — from solo founders to large VC firms, research institutions and startups. Applies across physical, remote and hybrid workspaces.

What does it cover?

Staff, contractors, collaborators, clients—any workplace-related interaction, including events, travel and online spaces.

What's expected?

Organisations must implement tailored and proportionate measures using:

- 7 Standards (leadership, culture, knowledge, risk management, support, reporting and response, monitoring, evaluation and transparency).

- 4 Guiding Principles (be consultative, aim for equality, consider intersectionality, person-centred and trauma-informed).

What does it mean for innovation?

- Builds inclusive, high-performing teams.
- Enhances reputation and investor confidence.
- Reduces legal and cultural risk.

How is it enforced?

The Australian Human Rights Commission can investigate and issue compliance notices.

Strategic lens for VCs and accelerators.

Consider Positive Duty compliance in due diligence and portfolio support.

4 Foster inclusive networks and community

Traditional entrepreneurial networks can be exclusive and transactional, particularly affecting diverse participants who value collaborative approaches to relationship-building. Peer networks focused on ongoing

support and learning are crucial for sustainable engagement. Research shows women entrepreneurs often prefer these relationship-centred approaches over purely transactional networking.⁶²

Your leadership actions

- **Emphasise relational networks.** Focus on relationship-building rather than purely transactional networking, which resonates more with participants from a diversity of backgrounds.
- **Build critical mass.** Give attention to achieving sufficient numbers of women and other underrepresented groups in cohorts so individuals aren't alone or tokenised.
- **Connect with external organisations.** Engage organisations like regional economic councils, Indigenous chambers of commerce, and Supply Nation to enhance networking capabilities and foster culturally grounded business models.
- **Create safe spaces.** Ensure networking environments provide psychological safety and authenticity for entrepreneurs who are underrepresented.⁶³
- **Address internal exclusion.** When creating networks for specific communities (like LGBTIQ+ networks), focus on intersectional inclusion to ensure support reaches diverse individuals within those communities.⁶⁴

5 Expand success metrics and values alignment

Traditional startup metrics focused solely on profit and rapid growth often fail to align with diverse motivations for innovation and entrepreneurship. First Nations entrepreneurship is typically connected to

community-based economic development rather than individual enterprise. Motivations are grounded in culture and supporting others, where cultural factors dominate over financial considerations.⁶⁵

Your leadership actions

- **Recognise different success metrics.**
Acknowledge that participants may prioritise social impact, community benefit and cultural goals alongside traditional business metrics.
- **Value multiple innovation pathways.**
Recognise diverse routes to success including social enterprises, community development, research commercialisation and cultural preservation.
- **Integrate cultural responsiveness.**
For culturally diverse participants, incorporate approaches that recognise social and cultural development alongside economic objectives, such as integrating First Nations values with business curricula.⁶⁶
- **Create flexible evaluation frameworks.**
Develop assessment criteria that capture various forms of value creation, not just financial returns.
- **Embrace different motivations.**
Understand that embedding values like creating social impact and community benefit may resonate more strongly with individuals from different backgrounds and help weaken stereotypes about entrepreneurs with diverse experiences.⁶⁷

6 Implement robust measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL) systems

Creating lasting change requires ongoing measurement, evaluation and learning that goes beyond traditional metrics to understand real impact and inclusion.

Research shows DEI tools frequently focus on addressing individual challenges rather than systemic issues and lack feedback loops for improving practices.⁶⁸

Your leadership actions

- **Listen for signals, not just indicators.** Traditional metrics might tell you participant demographics, but signals help you understand whether people feel genuinely supported and included.⁶⁹
- **Create feedback loops.** Design systems that adapt based on what you learn from diverse communities, recognising that inclusive practices evolve.
- **Use intersectional analysis.** Understand how multiple identities create different experiences, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches.
- **Collect meaningful data.** Gather intersectional demographic data and create opportunities for anonymous feedback about participant experiences.
- **Review graduation criteria.** Assess requirements that may systematically disadvantage certain groups, such as minimum attendance requirements that affect people with caring responsibilities. Ensure that mandatory attendance requirements can be adjusted to accommodate Sorry Business and other cultural leave types.
- **Track post-program outcomes.** Monitor which groups access funding and runway services after program completion and provide targeted support where needed.

DEI in action

activate your best practice

This week:

Audit one aspect of your program through an inclusion lens. Choose your language and marketing, your accessibility, or your mentorship structure.

This week:

Implement one concrete change based on your audit and start collecting signals about how it's working.

This week:

Expand your efforts to work across structural, relational and hearts/minds changes simultaneously.



Remember

Your program doesn't just create startups – it shapes what innovation looks like in Australia. The entrepreneurs and innovators you support today will influence the innovation ecosystem for decades to come.

case study example



Example 1: Designing for inclusion unlocked First Nations participation

Prior to 2020, one innovation sector leader found that, to the team's knowledge, no Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses had ever been funded by the program. Rather than 'advertising harder', this leader redesigned the program so eligibility and processes fit how Indigenous organisations operate, including allowing incorporated not-for-profits to apply and introducing conversation-based scoping instead of written EOIs.

These changes had immediate impact: *"Within a couple of weeks of us changing that, someone that had been negotiating with [us] for a couple of years actually signed their first contract with us... [and] we're currently tracking at approximately 10% of the projects we approve each year going to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned companies."*

To make participation feasible around caring and community commitments, she also rejected fixed rounds: *"One of the things that we do... is that [applications are] open 365 days a year – just a rolling deadline – because life doesn't present itself in nice little packages... it's better that you come to this work when you are ready."*

The leader of the innovation program notes that a commitment to DEI should go beyond checking boxes: *"You can't create a box and then try and shove people into that box... The problem is the shape of the box... you've got to create something from the outset that's fit for purpose and that requires you to be doing consultation and speaking to people from the start."*

Reframing 'high performing' to passion and context allowed them to let young people's potential shine. Regardless of how 'high performing' an individual was, people were more likely to see their success as part of a collective. In addition, life complexities like Sorry Business and caring responsibilities can result in failed subjects.

However, once diverse participants receive support and a clear pathway, *"The grades take care of themselves... they absolutely shine as a result. If it's an individual who is coming with the community's backing and it's a community identified need then it should be an absolute yes [for inclusion in the program]."*

The program focuses on an individualised model for providing support rather than one size fits all. Extra supports are provided if there are extra challenges: *"Anyone can achieve, it just depends on how much support is provided to them."*

The program addresses barriers to cultural practices through the structure and design of the program. Western models of innovation are often centred on the individual and may not cater for shared incomes or collective-benefit models. Generational wealth and startup capital can also be barriers to innovation.

The program leader suggests programs be designed with cultural considerations in mind. Allowing space to ask Indigenous women *“Who else needs to be in this room?”* — can lead to inviting in Elders as part of conversations, as cultural authority and support. Showcasing and amplifying Indigenous women matters. Intergenerational knowledge can be facilitated through programs employing previous program graduates as mentors for newer entrepreneurs.

The program has also made tech support available, as over half the young women in the program asked for this. This includes support for internet access through WiFi dongles and laptops. Forms and documents are made available in hard copy and can be sent out to communities with a stamped envelope, taking into account longer turnaround times. People can also have forms filled in by the office over the phone, then sent to them completed for their agreement.



VCs, angels,
philanthropists
and government

Funders

Your critical role as
innovation architects

What gets funded has the best chance of success. Your role as both funder and thought leader means your voice and decisions shape which innovations get developed, which entrepreneurs succeed, and ultimately which solutions reach the market.

Your power as a funder.

In Australia's innovation ecosystem, you hold the keys to opportunity.

The stark reality is that in 2024, women-founded startups received only 2% of Australian startup funding, with all-women teams receiving on average \$1 million compared to \$3.2 million for all-men teams.⁷⁰ As well, tech funding in Australia remains concentrated in NSW, with Victoria and Queensland second and third.⁷¹ Your funding decisions determine whose innovations see the light of day.

Your voice as a thought leader.

Your influence extends far beyond individual investment decisions.

Other funders, entrepreneurs, and policymakers look to your lead. When you champion inclusive innovation, you shape industry standards and ecosystem culture. Your voice matters – use it to drive transformation.

Your legacy for Australia's future.

Reflect honestly on how your current policies and practices contribute to or alleviate inequality.

Are you helping Australia grasp its full innovation potential, or are you perpetuating systems that waste talent? The entrepreneurs you fund today are building tomorrow's solutions to climate change, healthcare, economic development, and social challenges. Who gets to be part of creating Australia's future?

Evidence-based

Actions you can take to contribute to DEI

1 Transform your investment assessments to uncover hidden potential

Traditional evaluation processes often perpetuate existing biases, missing breakthrough innovations that come from diverse perspectives and lived experiences. While strong selection processes predict success, biased selection can negatively impact diversity outcomes.⁷²

Women face substantial funding disadvantages: they experience differential treatment in lending practices regarding loan size, interest rates and collateral requirements.⁷³ The venture capital sector shows stark underrepresentation, with less than 8% of VC firm partners being women and only 15% of VC-funded businesses having women on executive teams.⁷⁴ Similarly, queer entrepreneurs face barriers in pursuing enterprise support and venture capital.⁷⁵ First Nations entrepreneurs encounter systemic racism and racial discrimination, including persistent racial

stereotyping, a 'trust deficit' in business ecosystems and their businesses being labelled as 'high risk'.⁷⁶ Only a small percentage of First Nations entrepreneurs successfully secure bank loans, with many reporting outright loan refusals.⁷⁷

Your leadership actions

- **Address selection bias.** Implement structured decision-making tools that reduce subjective bias in evaluation processes, recognising that while rigorous selection can predict success, biased selection negatively impacts diversity.
- **Challenge investment biases.** Research advises challenging existing investment biases and recruitment practices that perpetuate inequality.⁷⁸
- **Diverse evaluation teams.** Include diverse perspectives in your investment committees and due diligence teams.
- **Alternative assessment methods.** Provide multiple pathways for founders to demonstrate their potential – written, verbal, video, or project-based presentations.
- **Network-independent evaluation.** Assess innovation potential rather than current network access, as women are often excluded from networks vital for entrepreneurship or feel ‘othered’ if they are included.⁷⁹

Idea

Before each funding decision, ask, “What assumptions are we making about this founder’s potential based on their current network or background rather than their innovation’s merit?”

This simple question can reveal unconscious biases that might otherwise go unnoticed.

DEI in action

funding decisions checklist

Team and founder assessment

- ☐ Have we examined our own potential biases before evaluating this opportunity?
- ☐ Are we assessing the founder's potential rather than just their current network access?
- ☐ Have we considered how systemic barriers might have affected this founder's journey?
- ☐ Are we evaluating the innovation's potential for both economic and social impact?

Due diligence process

- ☐ Have multiple team members with diverse perspectives reviewed this opportunity?
- ☐ Have we considered alternative indicators of success beyond traditional metrics?
- ☐ Are we assessing the true market opportunity rather than just the founder's current market access?

Investment decision

- ☐ Does this investment align with our commitment to inclusive innovation?
- ☐ How will we support this founder beyond capital provision?
- ☐ What ecosystem connections can we facilitate for this entrepreneur?
- ☐ How does this investment contribute to our portfolio's overall diversity and impact?



2 Redefine success to capture tomorrow's most valuable innovations

Narrow definitions of success focused only on unicorn valuations miss transformative innovations that solve problems and create lasting value. For example, First Nations entrepreneurship is typically connected to

community-based economic development rather than individual enterprise, with motivations grounded in culture and supporting others, where cultural factors dominate over financial considerations.⁸⁰

Your leadership actions

- **Focus beyond profit.** Include social value and community benefit alongside financial returns. Research shows First Nations entrepreneurship is often connected to community-based economic development, with cultural factors playing a significant role alongside financial considerations.⁸¹
- **Track Long-term value creation.** Monitor how your portfolio companies contribute to solving Australia's biggest challenges – climate, healthcare, education and economic development.
- **Value cultural innovation.** Recognise innovations that preserve and strengthen cultural knowledge and community connections.
- **Measure community benefit.** Develop metrics that capture broader social outcomes and community benefits beyond traditional financial indicators.
- **Avoid tokenistic treatment.** Ensure genuine engagement rather than tokenistic treatment or 'black cladding', where First Nations people are used merely as figureheads.⁸²



Remember

Inclusive innovation isn't about lowering standards — it's about recognising that our current systems often miss brilliant innovations because they come from unexpected places.

By expanding our definition of potential and success, we unlock Australia's full innovation capacity while building a more equitable and prosperous future for everyone.

3 Build comprehensive support systems that amplify founder success

Funding alone doesn't address the systemic barriers that limit which entrepreneurs can succeed in building and scaling innovations. Key barriers include:

- **First Nations** entrepreneurs face limited professional support, culturally inappropriate mentorship and restricted access to critical networks.⁸³
- **Women** report barriers with mentors, including "not looking/feeling like me" and "bad mentors/people preying on women".⁸⁴
- **Rural entrepreneurs** face unequal access to accelerator resources, limited funding opportunities, inadequate infrastructure and fewer mentorship connections.⁸⁵

Your leadership actions

- **Address intergenerational wealth gaps.** Provide targeted support to address systemic disadvantages, such as intergenerational wealth gaps that limit access to financial capital.⁸⁶
- **Support childcare and caring responsibilities.** Provide economic support for childcare to facilitate broader participation, as research shows this encourages more women to participate in entrepreneurship.⁸⁷
- **Network access.** Actively connect your portfolio founders to diverse professional networks, customers and additional funding sources.
- **Cultural confidence.** Provide access to mentors who reflect a diversity of backgrounds and can offer relevant guidance based on lived experience.

Start today

Choose one action from this guide and implement it in your next funding decision. Small changes in how we evaluate and support founders can create ripple effects that transform the entire ecosystem.

Idea

Create a 'founder success fund' and allocate 5–10% of your investment to post-funding support like executive coaching, market research, or strategic introductions.

Founders from underrepresented groups often need different types of support, so ask each founder what specific assistance would be most valuable rather than assuming one-size-fits-all solutions.

4 Lead industry transformation through your platform and influence

Individual funding decisions alone cannot transform systemic inequalities – but your voice and leadership can catalyse broader change.

Your leadership actions

- **Public commitment.** Publicly articulate your commitment to inclusive innovation and share your approach with other funders. This might include spotlighting the power of diversity in your thought leadership and on LinkedIn. Address your commitment to funding diverse founders on your website.
- **Data transparency.** Track and report on the diversity of your portfolio and the outcomes you're achieving.
- **Industry leadership.** Advocate for industry-wide standards and best practices that promote equitable access to funding.
- **Knowledge sharing.** Share lessons learned, successful approaches and case studies to help other funders improve their practices.
- **Prioritise learning.** Actively seek feedback from entrepreneurs of all backgrounds and adapt your practices.

What is the 'cultural load'?

Cultural load refers to the emotional, social and cultural burden often carried by First Nations individuals when they are placed in positions of visibility or representation.

This is also referred to as 'colonial load', recognising that the burden does not come from carrying culture itself, but from navigating systemic expectations in colonised spaces.

While spotlighting a First Nations entrepreneur or innovator may appear to offer a valuable platform for recognition and elevation, it can also unintentionally impose expectations to speak on behalf of their community, educate others, or navigate cultural sensitivities in predominantly non-Indigenous spaces.

This repeated exposure can be exhausting and culturally detrimental, especially when it's not accompanied by genuine structural support or shared responsibility.



Idea

Host an annual 'Inclusive Innovation Summit' where you bring together diverse founders, other investors and ecosystem stakeholders. Share your learnings, challenges and successes openly.

This positions you as an industry thought leader while creating valuable networking opportunities for underrepresented entrepreneurs in your portfolio.

DEI in action

case study example



Kirstin Hunter – CEO Birchal, former MD Techstars Tech Central Sydney Accelerator, former co-founder and CEO Future Super

“It’s very easy to build a really diverse cohort of driven, awesome founders. You just have to look for women and mixed gender teams and back up your good intentions with action.”

As a founder, investor and advocate, Kirstin Hunter’s approach to DEI in funding decisions is grounded in a dual lens: ethics and economics. Funding and supporting diverse founders is both right and smart – and is where she believes game changing innovations will come from.

Kirstin’s DEI strategy is not just philosophical – it’s operational. She implemented a series of concrete actions across the investment funnel when she led Techstars, for instance:

1. Top-of-funnel outreach

- **Attraction.** Targeted referrals to underrepresented founders not yet investment-ready that her program and funding could support, engaged in mentoring and pitch events and cultivated a reputation as a safe, supportive investor for women.

2. Application and selection process

- **Data tracking.** Gender composition and scoring were tracked at every stage of the application and interview process.
- **Bias awareness.** She identified that bias often emerged in ‘maybe’ decisions – where comfort and familiarity could sway choices. She shifted her mindset to ask: “Who deserves this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?”
- **Wild card strategy.** Instead of defaulting to familiar profiles, she used wild card spots to back founders who might not otherwise get a shot.
- **Screening committee dynamics.** Although the screening committee was majority male, Kirstin ensured gender balance in the founders presented and briefed members on bias-aware questioning (e.g. promotional vs. preventative questions).

3. Program delivery

- **Inclusive program design.** Kirstin identified that a diverse cohort often requires some adjustments so that founders can take full advantage of the opportunity.

Amending session timings to fit within 10am–2pm (taking pressure off the school run), moving social events to lunches instead of dinners and rewiring the space so that lights were dimmable all contributed to creating an environment where each member of the diverse cohort could thrive.

- **Supportive village.** The selection and briefing of mentors, presenters and investors was carefully curated to ensure that the village around these founders reflected the diversity of the founders themselves.
- **Stage to shine.** A deliberate redesign of the classic ‘demo day’ format – utilising a short intro pitch, a product video and then a facilitated Q&A with a trusted mentor – allowed all founders to show their strengths, compared to the traditional ‘10 minute pitch’ format which favours the dominant archetype of founder.

Kirstin also offers several practical, replicable strategies for funders seeking to improve DEI outcomes:

- **Quotas over targets.** Move beyond aspirational goals to concrete quotas at early stages of the funnel to open up the wildcard strategy and ensure diverse founders gain valuable experience.

- **Opportunity framing.** Reframe selection decisions around who deserves the opportunity, not just who feels familiar.
- **Junior investor empowerment.** Create “experimentation sleeves” – small pools of capital controlled by junior, diverse investors to deploy their perspectives and get experience, bypassing the normal investment committee process.
- **Reputation management.** Recognise that founder perceptions matter. Build trust through consistent action, not just branding.
- **Feedback loops.** Establish safe channels for founders to share honest feedback about their experience with the fund.

Reflecting on her journey, Kirstin offers several critical insights for other funders:

- **Bias is subtle and persistent.** Even well-intentioned investors must actively interrogate their comfort zones, especially in ambiguous decisions.
- **Progress requires courage.** Mistakes are inevitable, but avoiding action out of fear of failure perpetuates inequity.
- **Diversity ≠ safety.** A diverse cohort does not automatically mean a safe environment. Inclusion requires ongoing reflection and responsiveness.
- **Economic opportunity is real.** Diverse teams are often more capital-efficient and high-performing – and underfunded. Investing in them is not charity; it’s smart strategy.

“Progress comes from having the courage to try, knowing that there’s a chance you’ll get it wrong.”



Want to learn more?

Resources and terminology

Resources

- Diversity Council Aus: Inclusive Teams Toolkit <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusive-teams-toolkit>
- TechDiversity: Resources <https://tech-diversity.com.au/resources/>
- DISR: Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review report <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/pathway-diversity-stem-review-final-recommendations-report>
- Wiyi Yani U Thangani: Change Agenda for First Nations Gender Justice <https://www.wiyiyaniuthangani.com.au/resources/change-agenda>
- Disability Gateway: Good Practice Guidelines for Engaging with People with Disability <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/ads/strategy/good-practice-guidelines>
- Disability Gateway: Useful resources <https://www.disabilitygateway.gov.au/ads/strategy/good-practice-guidelines/useful-resources>
- Australian Research Council: Diversity and Inclusion Framework Summary <https://www.arc.gov.au/about-arc/arc-strategies-and-policies/diversity-and-inclusion-framework-summary-2024-2026>
- Disability Innovation Institute, UNSW: Doing Research Inclusively Background Paper <https://www.disabilityinnovation.unsw.edu.au/inclusive-research/guidelines>
- Diversity Council Australia: LGBTIQ+ resources <https://www.dca.org.au/resources/lgbtiq>
- Supply Nation: The Sleeping Giant Rises Report (2025) <https://supplynation.org.au/uploads/Supply-Nation-2025-The-Sleeping-Giant-Rises-report.pdf>
- National Indigenous Australians Agency: Data, Evolution and Research resources <https://www.niaa.gov.au/our-work/data-evaluation-and-research>

- International Labour Organisation's A Rough Guide to Inclusive Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Development <https://www.ilo.org/publications/rough-guide-inclusive-entrepreneurship-ecosystem-development>
- Australian Public Service Commission: First Nations Partnership Playbook <https://www.apsc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-06/First%20Nations%20Partnerships%20Playbook%20-%20For%20publication%20-%20Accessible.pdf>
- Australian Human Rights Commission: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Engagement Toolkit (2012) <https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20Peoples%20Engagement%20Toolkit%202012%20%28pdf%29.pdf>
- Centre for Excellence in Universal Design The 7 Principles <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles>

Terminology

Systems change. Transformation that addresses root causes rather than symptoms, working across hearts and minds (changing worldviews), relational (transforming power dynamics) and structural (shifting policies and resource flows) dimensions.

First Nations / Indigenous / Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. This Playbook includes the terms Indigenous, First Nations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relating to Indigenous peoples globally and the traditional inhabitants of Australia. The authors' preference is to use Indigenous as relating to all Indigenous peoples globally, and First Nations when specifically referring to Australia. Where alternative language is used, this is consistent with the literature used.

Race and ethnicity. These terms are intended to capture a series of cultural and lived experiences that incorporate ancestry, place of birth, linguistics, nationality, diaspora and religious affiliation.

Innovation ecosystem. The interconnected network of individuals, organisations and institutions that support innovation, including but not limited to, researchers,

entrepreneurs, accelerators, investors, universities and government agencies.

Care / Care work. Encompasses childcare, aged care, disability support, and for First Nations peoples, caring for family, community and Country.

Disability. Refers to a physical, mental, intellectual or sensory condition that may impact a person's ability to participate fully in daily activities or environments, often shaped by societal barriers rather than individual limitations.

Neurodivergence. Describes variations in cognitive functioning—such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia—that differ from the neurotypical norm and reflect diverse ways of thinking, learning and experiencing the world.

LGBTIQ+. Referring to gender and sexual diverse people, we may use acronyms including LGBTIQ+ (referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer/questioning or other identities). We have attempted to keep language consistent while also recognising the diversity within particular communities.

About the partners

About GIWL

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GIWL (pronounced 'jewel') was founded by former Prime Minister Julia Gillard with a simple mission – to bring together research, practice and advocacy into a powerful force for change towards gender equality.

Based at the Australian National University, GIWL ANU was established in 2020 as the first international base of The Global Institute for Women's Leadership as a sister institute to GIWL King's College London, with a particular focus on advancing equality in Australia and the Asia Pacific. We leverage some of the world's leading expertise on the Asia-Pacific, supported by deep, wide networks of researchers and practitioners across this diverse and highly dynamic region.

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About WYUT

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Chaired by June Oscar AO, the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, Wiyi Yani U Thangani (pronounced 'we-yani-you-thung-ani')—meaning 'Women's Voices' in Bunuba language—elevates the voices of First Nations women, girls and gender diverse people, knowing that they hold the solutions to drive transformative change.

The Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute for First Nations Gender Justice provides the evidence that the inequalities experienced by First Nations women, girls and gender diverse people are perpetuated and entrenched by mainstream systems and structures that have marginalised these voices for generations. First Nations women, girls and gender diverse people are clear: we need large-scale structural change to create a world where the unique cultural, social, economic and political rights and interests of First Nations women, girls and gender diverse people are realised.

The team would like to acknowledge the contributions of Banok Rind, Chloe Wegener, Niamh Kealy, and Sophie Spry.

About CSIRO's ON Program

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As part of CSIRO, Australia's national science agency, the ON Innovation Program is a flagship initiative designed to accelerate the translation of research into real-world impact. Aligned with CSIRO's purpose to deliver the science Australians need for the nation they want – productive, sustainable, healthy and secure – ON empowers researchers to bridge the gap between discovery and application.

ON is Australia's national innovation program, dedicated to unlocking the potential of research to solve our most pressing challenges. Through immersive programs, expert mentoring and a collaborative community, ON equips researchers with the skills, confidence and networks to turn breakthrough ideas into tangible solutions. Whether exploring new pathways or launching ventures, ON supports researchers at every stage of their journey, fostering a vibrant innovation ecosystem that drives national resilience, competitiveness and prosperity.

Endnotes

- ¹ Adapted from the Canadian Council for Refugees.
- ² Cut Through Venture & Folklore Ventures, 2024.
- ³ Department of Education, 2024b.
- ⁴ Cut Through Venture & Folklore Ventures, 2024.
- ⁵ D’Almanda-Remedios, 2024.
- ⁶ Brush et al., 2019; Australian Government, 2020; Deloitte Australia, 2022.
- ⁷ OECD/European Commission, 2023.
- ⁸ ABS, 2021a; ABS, 2022a, 2022b.
- ⁹ Darcy et al., 2022.
- ¹⁰ Indigenous Business Australia, 2024; Collins & Norman, 2018.
- ¹¹ ABS, 2021b.
- ¹² D’Almanda-Remedios, 2024.
- ¹³ Bryan & Lyons, 2024.
- ¹⁴ Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979.
- ¹⁵ Annese, 2025.
- ¹⁶ Doan & Kennedy, 2023.
- ¹⁷ Black, 2025.
- ¹⁸ Robinson et al., 2025.
- ¹⁹ Elizabeth Broderick & Co., 2022.
- ²⁰ Blacksmith & McCusker, 2023.
- ²¹ Diversity Council Australia, 2024.
- ²² Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, 2018.
- ²³ Cook, 2015.
- ²⁴ Bourke, 2016.
- ²⁵ D’Almanda-Remedios, 2024.
- ²⁶ Fine et al., 2019.
- ²⁷ Diversity Council Australia, 2025.
- ²⁸ McGowan et al., 2025.
- ²⁹ Blackmore & Sanderson, 2017.
- ³⁰ Harré, 2018.
- ³¹ For example, the International Labour Organisation’s ‘A Rough Guide to Inclusive Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Development’ (2024).
- ³² Bennett and Gibb, 2022.
- ³³ Pathak, 2019.
- ³⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024.
- ³⁵ Campbell, 2024.
- ³⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission, 2022.
- ³⁷ MacNeil et al., 2022.
- ³⁸ Maritz & Foley, 2018; Collins & Norman, 2018.
- ³⁹ Brush et al., 2019.
- ⁴⁰ Cooney & Licciardi, 2019.
- ⁴¹ MacNeil et al., 2022.
- ⁴² Fletcher et al., 2024; Morgenroth et al., 2015.
- ⁴³ Campbell, 2024; Pathak, 2019.
- ⁴⁴ Kutlaca & Radke 2022.
- ⁴⁵ Foley et al., 2018.
- ⁴⁶ Pathak, 2019.
- ⁴⁷ Mohammadzamani, 2024.
- ⁴⁸ Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018.
- ⁴⁹ MacNeil et al., 2022.
- ⁵⁰ Kuschel, 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018.
- ⁵¹ Darcy et al., 2020; Demeyère, 2024.
- ⁵² Demeyère, 2024.
- ⁵³ Stenn & Osterholt, 2023.
- ⁵⁴ Bennett & Gibb, 2022.
- ⁵⁵ Klein et al., 2024.
- ⁵⁶ Stenn & Osterholt, 2023.
- ⁵⁷ Mohammadzamani, 2024.
- ⁵⁸ Haines, 2016.
- ⁵⁹ Mohammadzamani, 2024.
- ⁶⁰ Maritz & Laferriere, 2016.
- ⁶¹ Fletcher et al., 2024.
- ⁶² MacNeil et al., 2022; Brush et al., 2019.
- ⁶³ Fletcher et al., 2024.
- ⁶⁴ Fletcher et al., 2024.
- ⁶⁵ Maritz & Foley, 2018; Collins & Norman, 2018.
- ⁶⁶ Padilla-Meléndez et al., 2022.
- ⁶⁷ Demeyère, 2024.
- ⁶⁸ Campbell, 2024.
- ⁶⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission, 2024.
- ⁷⁰ Cut Through Venture & Folklore Ventures, 2024.
- ⁷¹ Australia Venture & Startup Report, 2025.
- ⁷² Hoffman & Radojevich-Kelley, 2012; Moroz et al., 2024.
- ⁷³ Brush et al., 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018.
- ⁷⁴ Brush et al., 2019.
- ⁷⁵ Cooney & Licciardi, 2019.
- ⁷⁶ Maritz et al., 2021a, 2021b; Collins & Norman, 2018.
- ⁷⁷ Collins & Norman, 2018; Maritz et al., 2021a.
- ⁷⁸ Kuschel, 2019; Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018.
- ⁷⁹ MacNeil et al., 2022; Ozkazanc-Pan & Clark Muntean, 2018.
- ⁸⁰ Maritz & Foley, 2018; Collins & Norman, 2018; Pearson & Daff, 2014.
- ⁸¹ Maritz et al., 2021a; Pearson & Daff, 2014.
- ⁸² Menzies et al., 2024.
- ⁸³ Maritz et al., 2021a.
- ⁸⁴ Eversole et al., 2019.
- ⁸⁵ Maritz et al., 2021a; Eversole et al., 2019; Birdthistle et al., 2022.
- ⁸⁶ Maritz et al., 2021a; Collins & Norman, 2018.
- ⁸⁷ Brush et al., 2019.

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