

# Just 1 in 5 employees in the space industry are women—this lack of diversity is holding us back, say researchers

May 16 2023, by Elise Stephenson and Cassandra Steer

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This week, the [Australian Space Summit](#) is celebrating some of our nation's strengths and achievements in the space sector. But it's taking

place under the shadow of significant cuts to space technology investment [announced in last week's federal budget](#).

Space technologies play a critical role in responding to many national priorities, such as climate and disaster resilience, connecting regional Australians, contributing to regional security and driving economic growth. Yet, the sector suffers from a branding issue—most people think of rockets and astronauts, rather than the satellites we depend on globally.

This leads to a misunderstanding in government of the importance of [space](#) technologies to the issues we are seeking to solve. It also makes it harder to recruit talented people to the field.

So, how do we find enough people with the skills necessary to grow this critical technology sector?

## **Why diversity and inclusivity matter**

The answer is placing a new priority on talent recruitment and expanding [diversity](#) and inclusivity in the space sector.

The space sector needs workers from all different backgrounds and disciplines, but is struggling to attract a diverse talent pool. This is due to a misconception that space only offers STEM-related jobs, as well as the overwhelmingly white and male make-up of the [space industry, government and academia](#).

This not only impacts the workforce pipeline, but also potentially the sector's funding, due to a limited view of what kinds of solutions the space sector can provide to society's biggest challenges.

This is an urgent public relations issue for the space sector. It needs to

rethink how it markets itself to the public to better recruit for a myriad of positions in fields like space law, policy, technology governance, social anthropology and archaeology, business, arts, communications and more.

The sector also needs to make diversity a priority. Currently, just [one in five employees in the space industry are women](#). First Nations Australians also continue to be sidelined, despite the fact the majority of our ground-based infrastructure for space systems is on Indigenous lands.

We need greater inclusivity of perspectives from people of diverse genders, sexual orientations and ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, as well as people with disability. Research shows diverse and inclusive groups lead to greater [trust, democracy and innovation](#), less "group think", more positive work environments and greater employee retention.

Additionally, greater diversity can make it easier to tell the story of why space technologies matter to society. This would help in terms of government funding and the industry's ability to punch above its weight globally.

## **A national conference on diversity in space**

Last month, we brought together over 200 experts from the space industry, government, academia and the community to discuss these issues at the first-ever [national conference on gender equality and diversity in space](#).

The participants agreed that diversity is an overlooked opportunity for the space sector. Many of the challenges facing the sector could be addressed by recruiting from a more diverse talent pool and ensuring

diverse perspectives are being [incorporated into technology design and solutions](#).

These are some of our key recommendations:

## **(1) Enhance workplace conditions and enact informal networks**

Policy changes can help with diversity recruitment, such as tackling poor organizational cultures, offering equitable leave policies and improving current promotion and hiring policies.

But informal networks are important, too. There are networks for women in space in various countries, such as [the US](#) and [New Zealand](#), which have proven to be vital in developing a more diverse workforce. A new Women in Space Network is [soon to be launched in Australia](#).

## **(2) Don't just pay lip service to diversity**

Diversity must be placed at the center of programs and policies in both the space sector and in governments at the federal and state/territory level. The space sector must also do a better job of explaining the importance of its work to [government agencies](#).

## **(3) Establish diversity procurement policies**

This includes minimum targets to support women-owned and First Nations-owned enterprises in the space sector and giving preference to space businesses that demonstrate improvements to diversity in their workforce.

## **Australia risks falling behind**

In 2025, Australia will host the [International Astronautical Conference](#), the largest annual conference for the [space industry](#) in the world. This is a great opportunity to showcase our leadership in promoting a values-based, diverse, equitable and sustainable space sector.

Yet, without tangible action now, Australia's space sector risks falling further behind our international counterparts.

The Australian Space Agency is currently working with a number of organizations, including the [Global Institute for Women's Leadership](#), the [ANU Institute for Space](#) and the [Australian Center for Space Governance](#), to develop our own policy for diversity in the space sector.

This is a step in the right direction, particularly in the wake of the latest budget. But the industry also needs to step up with data transparency on diversity, as well as tangible commitments and actions.

To this end, we are conducting research on improving diversity in the space sector. We are inviting anyone in government, industry and academic roles to [take part in a survey](#) to describe their experiences of inclusion, diversity, equality and access in their jobs. This input will contribute to Australia's statement on diversity and inclusivity in the space sector.

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