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**Dr. Fiona Simon**  
CEO  
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AUSTRALIAN  
HYDROGEN  
COUNCIL

## Women in Hydrogen: Dr. Fiona Simon

By [Joanna Sampson](#) on Mar 08, 2021 | [A2I Translate](#) ▼

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Dr. Fiona Simon has been CEO of the Australian Hydrogen Council (AHC) for almost two years and during that time, she has watched the hydrogen industry grow and expand across multiple sectors. The AHC itself has also experienced huge membership growth in past 12 months, reflecting the current momentum of the hydrogen industry.

Having worked in the energy regulation for more than 20 years, Simon's interest in hydrogen stems from the fact that it is the most abundant element in the universe and if we harness its potential, it can transform global energy production, use and storage.

For Simon, this International Women's Day theme, #ChooseToChallenge, means challenging not only stereotypes, biases and gender inequality inside and outside of the workplace, but also preconceptions. H2 View caught up with her to find out more as part of our exclusive *Women in Hydrogen* series.

**Thanks for giving H2 View your time Fiona. You're currently CEO of the Australian Hydrogen Council, why don't you tell us a little about that?**

As CEO, I am responsible for the day-to-day operations of the organisation and to ensure our mission is reflected in everything we do. At the AHC, we are focused on connecting industry and government to create policy that supports a secure, clean and resilient energy future based on hydrogen.

The industry has made great progress over the last couple of years, especially in 2020. The federal government's Technology Investment Roadmap was released, we saw significant investments in new energy technologies, and we adopted eight international standards to ensure the safe use, transport and trade of hydrogen.

We also experienced huge membership growth last year which reflects current momentum of the hydrogen industry. We are keen to grow our membership even further this year to enhance collaboration across the sectors.

**What first sparked your interest in hydrogen and working in this industry?**

My interest in the energy sector started early on in my career. I started working in energy regulation over 20 years ago and over that time I have learned a great deal about how to handle and progress complex policy and regulatory issues.

My interest in hydrogen stems from the fact that it is the most abundant element in the universe and if we harness its potential, it can transform global energy production, use and storage. It can power homes, cars, trucks, and even heavy industry.

It has been incredible seeing how far we have come in terms of hydrogen technology and I am proud to play a part in this sector to champion the work of the AHC's members.

**If you had to start your career from scratch, knowing what you do know now, what would you do differently?**

Overall, I wouldn't be where I am today if I hadn't navigated past challenges and been forced to learn some important lessons about communication, policy, management and collaboration.

Probably the main thing I would do differently is to give more consideration to where other people are coming from – the good and the bad – when they make bold statements. I have worked in many areas where people's walk and talk don't match, and I found that confusing. If I had to start again, I would ask more questions I think, rather than sitting with my confusion or making assumptions. Asking (trusted) others 'what do you think is going on here?' can save a lot of time!

**Tell us about one challenge you've faced as a female in your sector? How did you overcome it?**

There are a few challenges for women and the main one for me would be having to go to extra lengths to prove my competence, but to do so without affecting others' egos.

For example, five or so years ago I was advised to pretend I didn't know things, so that I could ask questions of the men around me and that would make them feel good. But I was also told I could only ask questions that I knew the men knew the answers to. This is because not knowing the answers would show the men up. A tricky one, because I didn't know what these guys did and did not know. I overcame that one by leaving the business as soon as I was able to. That behaviour came from the top so there was no point staying.

**The theme for this year's International Women's Day is #ChooseToChallenge. What does this and the day itself mean to you?**

What a great theme. #ChooseToChallenge at the least means women and men challenging stereotypes, biases and gender inequality inside and outside of the workplace. That's clearly important.

I also think it can be more than that. Challenge your own preconceptions. Choose your own narrative about who you are and what you 'should' be doing, and choose being okay with not knowing sometimes. And choose your challenges wisely – my example above was totally demoralising to live through, but there was no challenge I could mount at that point that was going to have the desired effect. If you are open to new experiences you will find better places to work. The bad places do tend to change (the place I was referring to is completely different only a few years later) but they may not do so in the time you need them to.

International Women's Day is a great milestone to reflect on what we have achieved over the years and the challenges we have faced and continue to face.

**Are there any key issues facing women today in the sector you work in?**

I see many businesses where women and men absolutely live and breathe gender equality in the workplace.

The worrying issues I see relates to companies where there's an implicit view that women in senior positions are 'taking men's jobs', and senior women are frozen out or undermined by their colleagues when they are promoted.

I would say this is one for the challenge to be made in the board room, and for zero tolerance by senior management.

**What's the best piece of advice you've ever been given?**

To not take things personally.

I know it's obvious, but it's still something I need to hear at times, particularly in new environments. For example, when I was feeling bad a few years back about some pretty poor workplace behaviour directed at me, a colleague told me not to take it personally. She got through to me by putting it into context based on her own significant experience on those issues. I knew it was more than a platitude from her because she was so good at her job and so pleasant and professional – no one could legitimately criticise her! She helped me see that it was the role I was in and what that symbolised to the other department, not me that was attracting the negative behaviour.

This is also related to the previous question about what I would do differently and the need to dig a bit deeper about what's going on.

**And what's the one piece of advice you'd give to young women starting out their careers?**

I would say, do your homework and then back yourself. State your perspective with respectful confidence (faked if necessary – but remember, you did your homework) and own it.

**Tell us about one woman who has positively impacted you in your career? What lesson did she teach you?**

Actually, it was the woman above – she was in my team and wired completely differently from me. Her calm objectivity and ability to accept the things she couldn't change were so impressive. And yet this wasn't apathy – she still worked hard and cared deeply. She taught me that the balance is possible!

**Finally, what's the key message you'd like to get across for International Women's Day?**

Everyone has a role to play in the global energy transition. It will be the most challenging thing we do in this lifetime and it will require the best and brightest minds on the planet.

*We've still got five exclusive Women in Hydrogen interviews to share with you in celebration of International Women's Day. Keep your eyes on the website, there's more to come!*

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