Image is an engineering problem

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HAND-wringing is not Iwona Miliszewska's style. The first woman from Victoria University to be inducted as a fellow of Engineers Australia is not cowed by the appalling statistics about gender imbalance in the profession.

According to VU's head of the school of engineering and science, while women account for only 12 per cent of the nation's engineers, 10 per cent of the industry body's 100,000 members and two per cent of its fellows, the picture is not entirely bleak.

"There continue to be initiatives that aim to improve the situation," Dr Miliszewska said. For example, earlier this year when chief scientist Ian Chubb scored $54 million in the federal budget to boost participation of all genders in science at all educational levels, including $20 million to improve the training of science teachers.

"And there needs to be more work on the national curriculum for secondary schools and this is happening as we speak," she said.

She is deputy president of the Australian Council of Deans of Information and Communication Technology. "Together with the Deans of Engineering we are lobbying for a greater presence of ICT and engineering in the secondary education, that is, setting engineering problems as practical exercises in the science classes.

"And it was just yesterday when the prime minister gave her address in the US and said we need more women in engineering."

Dr Miliszewska was born in Poland, attended university in Dresden in the former East Germany and emigrated with her husband and son 24 years ago. When she was a student there was no gender imbalance in the discipline. "We had a perfect 50-50 split, because of the quota system, where students were simply told where they would go to study and what they would study," Dr Miliszewska said.

Within a very short time of the Berlin Wall coming down, when students were allowed to choose their courses, women left in droves, and the proportion of women in engineering and IT dwindled to about eight per cent in Germany, before creeping back to about 12-15 per cent today, she said.

But she conceded the "image" problem the profession has, which includes too much career's advertising featuring hard hats and not enough thinking about what would appeal to sophisticated young women.

"The job of an engineer does not only mean work-gear and working in the field: in some disciplines, that is part of it.

"But how much of it is conceptual work, meetings with clients and collecting requirements, design? A great deal. So why not focus on that, why focus on the stereotypical portrayal?"