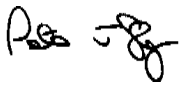
Senate Committee for Employment, Workplace Relations and Education

Attached is a submission to the Inquiry into Current and Future Skill Needs



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Background

NECA is the industry association representing contractors responsible for the delivery of electrical, voice and date communications systems. NECA represents the interests of its members in their capacity as businessmen, employers and technicians. It represents their interest in the marketplace and communicates with them about the behaviour in the marketplace as it impacts on their business.

The industry has a turnover of approximately $6 billion per annum. Sales in the communications sector is $1.75 billion per annum. It employs approximately 40,000 electrical tradesmen and communications cabling installers. It is responsible for:

- Employment of two of every three tradesmen skilled in this technology; and
- Employing and training three of every four apprentices.

NECA is the only association in the industry that represents the varying interests of electrical and communications contractors. It has more than 6,000 businesses as its members.

Terms of Reference

1) Areas of skills shortage and labour demand in different areas and locations, with particular emphasis on projecting future skills requirement.

Issue: Identifying current and future skill needs

Skill shortages and gaps occur in Electrotechnology due to many factors including:

- Demand for skilled tradespersons (driven by business and economic cycles.)
- Emergence of new technologies.
- Commercialisation of new technologies.
- Consumer uptake of new technologies.
- Attrition of skilled tradespeople.

Procedures to identify future skill needs, need to be developed and put into place. These include accessing reliable data on employment and training, and research to identify factors that can help in anticipating skill needs in the industry.

NECA is currently investing industry resources into research, and development of strategies to plan for the future skill needs in the Voice, Data and Video Communications sector. There is need across the whole Electrotechnology industry for this type of research.

Issue: Addressing skill needs

There is often a time lag between identification of skill gaps and shortages, and strategies being implemented to address these. Some of the factors causing this time lag were identified early in 2001 and include:

- Jurisdictional differences between states and territories in approving training pathways.
- Entry level training in Electrotechnology is generally through a New Apprenticeship pathway of ~4 years duration. Any changes to training effectively take at least part of this time for the skill sets to enter the workforce.
- Licensing – there is limited scope for the incorporation of new or emerging skill sets in the traditional trade training pathway for a systems electrician under the current trade training arrangements.
- Access to training – the capacity of many RTO's to deliver training in new high technology areas is limited.

Strategies to ensure an ongoing supply of skills to the industry are vital for continuous high quality installation, maintenance, repair of electrical and communications networks, especially at times of high demand. Some possible strategies include, dual skilling, workforce upskilling, alternative pathways for mature age entrants.

NECA is working to develop strategies, however encountering many barriers to efficient implementation of these strategies, including jurisdictional differences in implementing new training pathways.

Attrition – loss to industry or upwards or sideways movement

There is statistically a high level of attrition from trade training in Electrotechnology. 25% - 30% of those that begin training do not end up working as a tradesperson. An analysis of the pathways taken by skilled people leaving the industry would enable targeted strategies to slow this attrition where deemed appropriate.

2) The effectiveness of current Commonwealth, state and territory education, training and employment policies, and programs and mechanisms for meeting current and future skills needs, and any recommended improvements.

Industry need for alternative training pathways

The needs in the Electrotechnology industry are often for a breadth of skill across trades, for example data communications and electrical, refrigeration and electrical, instrumentation and electrical. This type of training provides the industry with skilled personnel in specialised areas while maintaining a flexible responsive workforce. The current training system is not open to this type of training, being more geared to depth of skills rather than breadth. Considerable resources are being invested by industry across all states to enable access to the required training, however progress is slow. Despite industry wide recognition of the need for these pathways for a number of years, to date there are only isolated groups in a number of major centres.

3) The effectiveness of industry strategies to meet current and emerging skill needs.

Issue: Recruitment

Industry image

Considerable work is being done to change the image from one of a traditional, dead-end dirty trade to an industry working at the cutting edge of communications and automation technology. Work started under a careers project through NISI, to provide information to schools and their students on the scope of the Electrotechnology industry and careers available to young people continues, but still needs investment of resources to provide all young people with realistic knowledge of career choices in Electrotechnology.

Mature age entry

With the aging Australian workforce, and less young people available to take up apprenticeships, strategies must be put into place to enable mature age apprenticeships. At present numerous barriers exist.

Transitional programs, ViS, SNAP

Electrotechnology is currently not well represented in Vet in Schools or School Based New Apprenticeships. Where programs exist there is 85+% transition to full time employment and training in the industry. Electrotechnology does not fit as readily into current school practices as many other industries, and presents more challenges for schools in implementing and sustaining programs.

It is vital that these programs are developed in the near future to allow students access to training in Electrotechnology while still at school.

4) The performance and capacity of Job Network to match skills availability with labour-market needs on a regional basis and the need for improvements.

5) Strategies to anticipate the vocational education and training needs flowing from industry restructuring and redundancies, and any recommended improvements.

Responses to emerging/converging technologies

Automation and communication are increasingly permeating all work in the Electrotechnology. Very few installations are now completed without some computer controls and advanced communications technology. The skills for this work are predominantly being picked up on the job as required with

training provided as needed. The responses to the technology are reactive with little forward planning on the skill needs of the industry.

NECA has initiated research and conducted forums that address these issues in the Voice, Data and Video sector of the industry.

6) Consultation arrangements with industry, unions and the community on labour-market trends and skills demand in particular, and any recommended appropriate changes.

Issue: Communications

Industry-RTO-ITAB

There is a need for effective up to date research on the skill requirements of industry. The role of ITABs in communicating industry requirements to RTO and Government must be proactive with full consultation with industry.

Industry Government

Partnerships between industry and government have proven to be effective in addressing issues of skill shortages and gaps in Electrotechnology. The National Industry Skills Initiative was effective in enabling the Electrotechnology industry examine skill shortages and begin to implement programs to address these.

Effective partnerships b/n training and industry

Improved links need to be built between industry and the RTOs delivering training for the industry. The training required for much of the new and emerging technology being utilised by industry is often not available through RTO's due to the pace of change in industry.