

Submission to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Legislation Committee
Australian Technical Colleges (Flexibility in Achieving Australia's Skill Needs) Bill 2005

As an ordinary citizen, I have been following the occasional media reports on the government's intentions regarding this matter and feel I might submit the following observations to assist the government in framing the proposed legislation and possibly exploring other options if deemed appropriate.

1. The setting up of more technical colleges will involve the employment of 'teachers' from the respective trades. If there are already shortages in those trades, where will the 'teachers' come from without exacerbating the problem? Might some retired trades-people be a possible source?
2. "Flexibility" is a term often bandied about in this area but, in practice, this is hampered by the trade licensing methodology which is often vertically integrated and assumes or requires a certain training path. While, hypothetically, there is scope for recognition of prior learning; in practice this is quite an expensive process for the ordinary worker and thus often not worth exploring.

I offer my own experience as an example. I was trained as a radio technician with the former Department of Aviation. This training included all the theoretical and most practical aspects of electricity (and more) required by electricians except for a small number of topics unique to the electrical contracting industry such as S.A.A. wiring rules (Now AS3000) and issues relating to switchboard and building supply safety. I also studied for, and then received a Broadcast Operator's Certificate which included topics on Diesel Gensets, etc.

When the government, in its wisdom, decided to make my employer a G.B.E. and submit it to state licensing, the state-based fiefdoms in that structure required me to again prove my competence by submitting to a series of tests. I (and my colleagues) passed these with flying colours (as the saying goes). I was required to participate regularly in switchboard rescue 'refresher' courses and view material on fault current (a potential hazard associated with insulation or component failure immediately adjacent, electrically, to the point of mains supply). But the license I subsequently received only allowed me to continue working on "Communications Equipment" (a vague definition which did not truly encompass all the types of equipment I did work on).

The outcome was that my employer still had to send multiple trade groups into the field to maintain the equipment and, in my view, the electricians were able to inflict certain conditions advantageous to them on me. My 'status' was thus diminished, my competence irrelevant, and my ability to make the organisation more efficient hamstrung.

Indeed, in my view, the organisation was unable to gain a number of efficiencies because the various fiefdoms still had their representatives at senior levels within the organisation.

In similar fashion, when I enquired about a position as a 'teacher' at a T.A.F.E. college, they stated that they required same to have the unrestricted electrician's license.

So much for flexibility.

3. Licensing exacerbates the skills shortage.

As demonstrated above, I may have been competent to do certain work –if not all – but licensing and the related legislation prohibited it because the work is delineated in a certain way.

4. Licensing often covers higher skills which are seldom needed by most in the field.

When my erstwhile employer implemented multi-skilling I became more aware of just what types of work the electrical staff did. While I can accept that appropriately trained and remunerated staff are always necessary, I came to realise that, whereas I often needed to use all my advanced knowledge and skills, my electrical colleagues needed to use theirs only rarely despite us receiving similar remuneration.

Translated to the wider world, do we really need people with a full electrical license to run wires in domestic residences and connect power points? In other countries, this work can be done by anyone. Indeed, I would suggest the requisite knowledge and experience ought to be part of general education along with driving a vehicle – both involve safety, yet we allow anyone to drive and accept a considerable death rate while very few people, in reality, have been electrocuted and the risks have been reduced by several orders of magnitude with the introduction of safety switches.

Perhaps there are similar situations in other skill shortage areas – e.g. nursing.

I trust that my comments might cast light from a different angle on the problem the government seeks to address and thereby bring more clarity to the debate.

Yours faithfully,
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