



Lead.**Connect.**

# **INQUIRY INTO INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY:**

## **Workforce for the new economy**

**Submission from Master Electricians Australia**



# Background

Master Electricians Australia (MEA) is a national employer association representing the interests of electrical contractors and the broader electrotechnology industry. As one of the longest running organisations of its kind, MEA has established itself as the leading voice of the electrotechnology sector. MEA is recognised by industry, government and the community as the electrical industry's foremost business partner, knowledge source and advocate. The organisation's website is: [www.masterelectricians.com.au](http://www.masterelectricians.com.au).

We have elected to provide focus our comments on a term of reference, “the extent to which students are graduating with the skills needed for the jobs of today and of the future”, specifically in reference to the electrotechnology industry.

We would argue that as technology advances, electrotechnology students in the VET sector are not always graduating with the skills needed for the jobs of today and of the future. We propose the below reforms to address what represents a barrier to innovation and productivity.

## ***Impact of technological advancement***

The increase in demand for energy efficient technologies, including solar, battery storage and electric vehicles, in addition to substantial growth in the use of digital technology, has changed the skills set now expected of electricians. Unfortunately, the qualification content for an electrician (Certificate III Electrotechnology Electrician) has struggled to maintain currency with these changes, and training has fallen behind industry advancement. We would like to see training providers commit to more active consultation with employer groups and other industry bodies to identify trends in technology and reflect those in training content. There are reference committees in operation, however, the progress of these bodies cannot always keep pace with the developments in technology.

## ***Flexible apprenticeship progression models***

A more flexible approach to apprenticeship progression would better meet the needs of a future labour force focused on innovation and creativity by facilitating those apprentices with advanced skills entering the industry to contribute to the economy.

Competency completion, as opposed to the traditional time based apprentice progression system, enables apprentices who can demonstrate achievement in all competencies to obtain their qualification before a nominated end date in their training contract.

Completion is based on skills and work performance and recognition for the apprentice's achievements and contributions, not time served. A competency based system benefits employers by facilitating apprentices with more advanced skills becoming qualified tradespeople sooner. This can address skills shortages and open up the opportunity for new apprentices to enter the system as others become qualified. Equally, this system provides further opportunities for apprentices who have not yet achieved competency by a training contract end date to engage in additional training to reach a licensed outcome. The result being more apprentices being armed with the skills needed for the jobs of today and of the future.

## ***Front load training***

MEA would also encourage government to invest additional resources into exploring alternate pathways for apprentices, such as front load training, to encourage both apprentices and employers to utilise the apprenticeship system.

In other vocations, such as nursing, off-the-job training is provided to students before they undertake the practical component of their qualification. This is currently not the case for electrical apprenticeships, with on and off the job training intertwined throughout the course of the apprenticeship.

This can present difficulties for both employers and the apprentices. Employers must invest time and money in training inexperienced apprentices who can only be charged out to customers at apprentice rates. Apprentices also face the struggle of balancing their studies with the demands of a hands-on, full-time job.

Front load training on the other hand provides apprentices and employers with the option of undertaking a significant portion of the formal training component of the qualification at the beginning of an apprenticeship. Front load training would allow an apprentice to complete the Certificate II of his/her qualification before working with an employer or even up to the first two stages of the Certificate III. Being able to engage an apprentice with a higher skill set and who has been exposed to the challenges of the industry would certainly give more employers the confidence to take on an apprentice, with less risk of non-completion.

## ***External capstone testing***

Any changes introduced to encourage innovation and creativity in the electrical industry must not do so as the expense of electrical safety. Accordingly, MEA would urge that any reform to the apprenticeship system require external capstone testing for apprentices.

The Capstone Test model provides an external validation of skills acquisition in electrical apprenticeships because it is set by an independent body. However, the integrity of the Capstone can be compromised if the test is conducted by the Registered Training Organisation (RTO) itself, as occurs in Queensland. A key issue is the variability of the Capstone Test processes, with RTOs able to conduct assessments at their own premises, and the test varying between each training organisation. The Queensland system provides the potential for substandard RTOs to streamline Capstone assessments in order to boost completion numbers for financial gain. Providers who adhere to the more stringent standards for Capstone assessment may face difficulties in attracting apprentices who are looking for an easier route to obtaining their qualification.

An external Capstone testing system is critical to the safety and productivity of the electrical industry. It provides assurance that all apprentices are held up to the same high standard regarding their technical skills and knowledge before they are permitted to perform electrical work for the public.

Under-skilled electrical workers fresh out of an apprenticeship pose a significant risk to the electrical safety of themselves and the community. We therefore recommend that all states and territories require external capstone testing for electrical apprentices. This would ensure that all apprentices graduate with the knowledge and skills to contribute to innovation and creativity within the electrical industry.

### ***Greater promotion of VET sector skills***

A lack of recognition for the value of VET sector skills can hinder the collaboration between industry and education providers to foster innovation. We would like to see vocational pathways being more consistently promoted throughout high schools, as strongly as the university streams are. Industry associations could be used as a valuable conduit to highlight the value of VET sector skills to an industry looking to boost creativity and innovation.

MEA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and would encourage the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training to actively engage with employers and employer groups on the issues raised.

Yours faithfully,



Malcolm Richards  
CEO