MASTER ELECTRICIANS AUSTRALIA

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First Nations Clean Energy Strategy

Enhancing First Nations benefits of CER through policy, funding and workplace diversity.

Chris Lehmann & Georgia Holmes
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Master Electricians Australia (MEA) is the trade association representing electrical contractors recognised by industry, government and the community as the electrical industry's leading business partner, knowledge source and advocate. Our website is www.masterelectricians.com.au

MEA believes all First Nations households across Australia should have the ability to participate in, and benefit from, consumer energy resources (CER) which are privately owned assets used to naturally generate, store and utilise energy in the most efficient manner providing reliable and affordable energy. It is our belief Government and Industry have a responsibility to proactively assist these communities to participate in CER through policy implementation, funding assistance, education and public infrastructure upgrades.

Examples of CER include:

- Rooftop solar photovoltaic units (Solar PV)
- Wind generating units
- Battery storage
- Electric vehicle (EV) batteries.

MEA strongly advocate for Vocational Educational Training (VET) to be integrated and streamlined into the secondary school curriculum with an equal weighting to Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). It is our strong belief this is the most impactful solution to addressing skills shortage issue, and consequently attraction and retention within Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) across all diversities (i.e. First Nation communities, gender, ethnicity, residential location, disabilities, etc.). The benefits include better equipped personnel entering the workforce, enhanced aptitude and competency screening, heightened attraction and retention and engagement by First Nations people. MEA sees this as the pivotal role in actioning societal, structural and systemic change within First Nations communities, better enabling these community's businesses and personnel to work in the electrotechnology field.

Vocational Education Training in secondary schools (VETSS) can foster safe and supportive learning environments. It is likely to encourage a greater number of First Nations students to engage with their secondary school learning as the curriculum is designed to extend beyond the traditional academic/commercial pathway of ATAR schooling, and motivate students who would otherwise be disengaged or disincentivised (due to location), to work towards their desired STEM career.

Goals

Q1, Are the draft principles and goals proposed appropriate and achievable? Are there any gaps or do you have suggestions for others that could be considered?

Principles

MEA generally supports the proposed principles but are wary towards the extent these take precedence in the electrification process regarding their financial and efficient practicality. These principles need to be part of balanced considerations throughout the electrification transition.

a, Access to Clean Reliable Energy is a Human Right

Clean energy is a basic human right that can and should be accessible to all Australian households. It is disconcerting that some First Nations people misperceive "renewable solutions like solar panels [as] reserved for wealthy Australians and private homeowners who can access incentives to install these technologies on their homes"[1]. In fact, the opposite is

[1] Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, '*First Nations Clean Energy Strategy Interim Feedback Report from Engagement to Date*' Australian Government, [29 September 2023], 13.

true, and we advocate that with the right regulation, funding and skilled workforce all First Nations people will become positioned to participate in, and benefit from, CER.

b. First Nations People Will Self-Determine how they Lead, Participate in and Benefit from the Clean Energy Transformation.

We are concerned this principle could allow First Nations people to determine if, when and how their communities' households are electrified. MEA have participated in many Federal and State consultations regarding CER, with some explicitly proposing to mandate household transition towards electrification (refer to ACT's *Integrated Energy Plan*[2]). We appreciate that respect towards our First Nations people and culture is essential, but we believe this should not allow any one group to avoid any such electrification mandates and adherence to Australian Standards. It is important this principle is restricted to ensuring the transition process respects meaningful collaboration with First Nation communities.

c. First Nations Peoples Are Stewards and Custodians of Country, Connection Is Ongoing and Enduring + Cultural Heritage Should Be Recognised, Protected and Celebrated + Everyone Is Responsible for Building Genuine Partnerships and Collaboration, Underpinned by Monitoring and Reporting.

MEA encourage active and ongoing collaboration with First Nations people when developing electrification infrastructure to ensure cultural sites are protected. This would provide opportunity to improve First Nations' concerns that Government consultations are a "tick and flick"[3] process and would naturally strengthen First Nations relationships with Government and industry. We believe this will generate First Nations job and business opportunities and better position their communities to take "leading role[s] in the design and implementation of projects impacting their community"[4].

It is logical to utilise First Nations businesses for installing, designing and maintaining CER in predominantly First Nations populated areas provided there is an appropriately skilled indigenous workforce available. we reiterate our strong belief that VETSS will inherently result in greater number of First Nations people entering STEM in metropolitan areas (please refer to Q8).

Goals

MEA believes Government's goals are achievable. As aforementioned, with the right government and industry assistance, reliable and affordable solar PV electricity can become available to all households. It follows that First Nations livelihoods will vastly improve, not only through cheaper energy, but also through career development opportunities as a local electrotechnology industry develops, and reliable power facilitates the growth of other successful economic endeavours. Electrification across all areas of Australia will provide First Nations people the opportunity to develop more prosperous communities.

Respecting First Nations cultural knowledge and heritage sites through collaboration should lead to a deepening of their community's relationship with Government and industry. A benefit of CER is its ability to utilise pre-existing transmission infrastructure; significant collaboration will therefore become necessary where that infrastructure is currently lacking. Strengthened partnership will allow Government and industry to educate First Nations communities on the significant non-financial and financial benefits they will directly reap from any electrification development in their areas.

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[2] *'DEVELOPING ACT'S INTEGRATED ENERGY PLAN Canberra is electrifying: Towards a net zero emissions city'*, ACT Government [August 2023].
[3] (n1), 10.
[4] *Ibid.*

Objectives

Government address existing policy and regulatory barriers.

Q2. What needs to change to ensure that First Nations peoples can access reliable, clean energy on an equitable basis, including those First Nations peoples located in metropolitan, regional and remote areas of Australia?

Solar PV allows households to take advantage of the abundant sunlight Australia receives enabling them to become less reliant on traditional one-way transmission generated energy which can be unstable and expensive. This is particularly useful for First Nations communities living in rural and remote areas where electricity is unreliable and often at the whims of climate events.

b. Home Energy Management Systems (HEMS)

Full optimisation of ToU tariffs can be achieved through HEMS which can make decisions to control appliances and utilise the energy most efficiently depending on the generation available. It is a powerful companion to home battery strategies to improve energy efficiency, time shift energy, and decrease emissions across Australia. Government should ensure First Nations households have education and affordable access towards HEMS.

c. Upgrading Traditional Networks to Allow for Two-Way Networks.

Government Investment is necessary to upgrade distribution and transmission infrastructure to reflect the changing energy supply chain, modifying it capabilities from a one-way system to a two-way system. This will allow First Nations consumers to not only receive energy but also transfer energy they have privately generated back to the grid and and support others in a community micro-grid..

d. Electric Vehicles (EV)

Realistically we don not envision remote First Nations households taking great advantage of Electric Vehicles. We appreciate this is more likely to benefit metropolitan First Nations households in the immediate future but believe Government should be implementing policies that make transitioning towards EVs an affordable eventual priority for rural and remote communities as such areas are likely to have low-social economic financing options.

3. How should government and industry support First Nations peoples to own and manage renewable energy assets for long-term sustainability and community benefit?

Please refer to Q2. We emphasise that reduced power bills and rebates received from returning excess energy to the grid could lead to greater economic opportunities and greater household disposable income.

Ensure quality information and resources

4. What strategies are most likely to improve how quality information, data and resources concerning the clean energy transformation is developed and disseminated to First Nations communities?

Whilst delivery of education in remote communities has its challenges, we believe that VETSS will inherently lead to better dissemination and understanding of information and data regarding the clean energy transformation throughout First Nation communities. Through their younger generation's schooling, they will become more exposed to CER and therefore likely develop a greater personal investment into the topics. Please refer to Q8 for greater discussion on VETSS.

5. What is the best way to build First Nations awareness and knowledge of clean energy and who should foster and deliver these outcomes? Do you have any suggested examples?
Please refer to Q4.

Influence and develop policy frameworks and programs

6. What aspects of the current regulatory environment that presently govern Australia's energy system most impact First Nations people's ability to participate in and benefit from the clean energy transformation? What strategies would be effective in reducing these impacts?
As discussed under Q2, MEA advocate that Government needs to implement and/or update the following –

- Solar PV installation incentives
- Home Energy Management Systems
- Two-way energy supply infrastructure
- EV charging.

Please refer to Q2 for greater discussion.

7. Which behaviours or outcomes should government consider incentivising through regulation, policy, or programs to improve First Nations people's participation in Australia's energy system?
MEA believes consumers largely prioritise costs in their decision making. We advocate that Government needs to preference tariff policies which generate consumer price response. Please refer to Q2.a for greater discussion on how this will incentivise and benefit First Nations communities.

Support and enable coordination and capacity development in First Nations Organisations

8. What is the best way to build First Nations organisations' capacity and expertise in clean energy development?
Throughout many submissions, MEA has strongly advocated that integrating VETSS with an equal weighting to ATAR is one of the key solutions to both diversity and skills shortages in STEM trades. The current schooling system moulds students to fit an academic structure, leaving behind those who are unwilling or unable to conform. Providing exposure and targeted training offers First Nations students enhanced opportunities for future success in STEM by providing a supportive and encouraging environment, better incentivising those who might otherwise be disengaged, to become proactive towards their future career. They are removed from the academic/commercial teaching structure of ATAR schooling and made to feel more included by teachings targeted towards their VET skill set. It will allow these students the same opportunity as students developing skills towards their academic/corporate career to pursue their STEM career from a school age. VETSS further allows for better aptitude and competency screening leading to greater attraction and retention of STEM apprentices. We can expect this to build First Nations organisations' capacity and expertise in clean energy development as an influx of our First Nations younger generations develop STEM careers.

MEA believe VETSS will also provide better opportunity in exposing STEM to First Nations students living rurally and remotely as it would be available within their current schooling framework, providing students within this community an equal opportunity to those living in urban areas to work towards STEM during their schooling. This is where we can expect to see cultural and systemic change towards diversity in STEM trades, alleviating pressures on rural and remote areas in the future.

9. What is the best way that governments and industry can build their internal capacity to support First Nations participation and benefit?

Government could consider establishing an Entity that educates First Nations communities how to utilise and benefit from renewables and CER assets. This same entity could also become fundamental in educating First Nations communities of the direct benefits they would receive from any transmission development that may impact their lands which allows electrification connection to the grid, and the revenue streams that may develop from “Right of access” arrangements. We believe this could foster success towards the goal and principle of deepening genuine collaboration between government, industry and First Nations.

10. What role should industry play in supporting First Nations develop their coordination and capacity?

We believe Government should lead collaboration between industry and First Nations through policies and a GOE/department. This will provide a pivotal point of contact that can act as a mediator for ongoing development.

11. What role do you think First Nations on-Country planning can play in realising benefits in the energy transformation?

This is beyond MEA’s expertise. Our advocacy focuses on encouraging government to update policies, infrastructure and provide financial assistance in helping all Australian households to participate and directly benefit from CER.

Facilitate workforce and business development

12. What is required to ensure First Nations businesses are ready and able to participate in Australia’s clean energy transformation?

We believe this requires a generational change through VETSS programs. This will take time to achieve, however, it would possibly curate a sustainable long-term solution to not only improving First Nations participation in electrification careers, but also the skills shortage in these remote areas in general.

Please refer to Q8 for more detail.

13. How could more opportunities for First Nations owned businesses be created for the Clean Energy industry?

Government should look to foster partnership between First Nations businesses and the electrification industry, especially in areas which are a predominantly populated by First Nations communities. .

More integrated VETSS programs over time, will also provide a grater pool of skilled labour of First Nations people which can be expected to significantly improve the quality and capacity of First Nations businesses.

14. What workforce development approaches will maximise First Nations participation in the clean energy workforce? What are the barriers to this happening and how can they be overcome?

We note that education and training for First Nations communities living in rural and remote areas can be difficult due to insufficient training resources and facilities, however, we believe VETSS and use of digital learning management systems, could address these issues through consistent exposure across all Australian students. Please refer to Q8 for our response.

Ensure access to financial support

15. To improve First Nations access to finance, what strategies are required? What additional financing opportunities are needed so First Nations peoples can participate in and benefit from the renewable energy transformation?

Please refer to our response under Q2.

16. What actions will lead to greater First Nations ownership of major renewable energy projects?

Meaningful VETSS programs provides better opportunity for competency and aptitude screening which leads to greater attraction and retention of apprentices in STEM trades. Higher rates of First Nation apprenticeship will generate a greater skilled pool of First Nation labour available to take ownership of major renewable projects. Please refer to Q8 for greater discussion.

17. What are the key barriers to greater First Nations participation and benefit in renewable energy projects and how can they be overcome?

Please refer to Q8.

Embed cultural and heritage protection

18. What can industry put in place when developing clean energy projects to ensure the cultural responsibilities of First Nations peoples are implemented throughout the project life cycle?

This is beyond MEA's expertise. However, we do advocate utilising First Nations tradespeople particularly in rural and remote areas to encourage/incentivise greater uptake of local community members into STEM trades. This will ensure there is continued local availability to maintain and repair CER into the future and integration of cultural responsibilities.

19. What does an ideal scenario look like where First Nations peoples can effectively manage their Country and cultural heritage responsibilities in co-existence with clean energy assets?

This is beyond MEA's expertise. Our advocacy focuses on encouraging government to update policies, infrastructure and provide financial assistance in helping all Australian households to participate and directly benefit from CER.

20. What does Free, Prior and Informed Consent look like to you and/or your organisation? And how can it be achieved in practice?

This is beyond MEA's expertise. Our advocacy focuses on encouraging government to update policies, infrastructure and provide financial assistance in helping all Australian households to participate and directly benefit from CER.

21. Please suggest documented examples of best practice cultural heritage protection models or standards being applied in domestic or international jurisdictions?

This is beyond MEA's expertise. Our advocacy focuses on encouraging government to update policies, infrastructure and provide financial assistance in helping all Australian households to participate and directly benefit from CER.

Recognise First Nations environmental values, management and expertise

22. What can government and industry put in place to ensure that First Nations environmental values and expertise inform the clean energy transformation and that indigenous design thinking is integrated into clean energy projects?

This is beyond MEA's expertise. Our advocacy focuses on encouraging government to update policies, infrastructure and provide financial assistance in helping all Australian households to participate and directly benefit from CER.

23. Please provide any other comments and suggestions you might have in relation to the development of a First Nations Clean Energy Strategy?

N/A.

Conclusion

MEA are generally supportive of the proposed goals, principles and objectives however we believe these should have a greater weighting in decision making where areas predominantly populated with First Nations communities. For metropolitan areas, we believe VETSS will inherently increase the number of First Nations people entering the electrotechnology field, eventually increasing the number of First Nations businesses and result in a natural inclusion of First Nation culture. We believe that the proposed goals, principles and objectives need to be a consideration in projects within metropolitan areas but evenly balanced by financial and efficiency considerations.

We promote the idea that all First Nations households can and should have access to CER and its benefits, which can be achieved through improved Government and Industry policies, funding and infrastructure. Government should provide rebates to First Nations households to assist in implementing solar PV panels, enabling First Nations communities to become more independent in energy sourcing and utilisation in addition to reaping the low energy cost saving benefits. When utilised in concert with ToU and HEMS, solar PV becomes an empowering tool for First Nations communities allowing for independence and autonomy. Long-term financial benefits through increased disposable income will be achieved and provide career opportunities for First Nations people leading to prosperous long-term economic growth.

Australia is currently facing a STEM skills shortage crisis which is particularly impacting remote and rural First Nations communities. We strongly advocate for VETSS to be integrated into the secondary school curriculum with an equal weighting to ATAR to expose all students, regardless of cultural background or geographical location, to opportunities in developing STEM skills and incentivise those students to work towards a prosperous STEM career. MEA argue that improved VETSS programs will create the necessary systemic and societal change and significantly increase First Nations STEM career participants, better positioning their communities across the country to be at the forefront of designing, installing and maintaining community CER. Government needs to address the cultural diversity issue within our skills shortage crisis immediately through our youngest generations to show the First Nations people that it is actively responding to concerns raised throughout roundtables to empower their communities to have “a qualified workforce”[5] and achieve the desired “growth and skill … in electrical engineering and design”[6]

MEA advocates VETSS is likely to be a long-term sustainable solution to skills shortages amongst First Nations people. It is time to change the narrative and begin emphasising the benefits and inclusiveness of STEM trades. Without cultivating this change at a young impressionable age, we cannot expect to see the First Nations diversity issue within STEM trades resolved.

We look forward to the outcome of Government’s First Nations Strategy and are available to partake in further discussion.

[5] (n1), 14.
[6] (n1), 16.