

Jobs and Skills Australia's 2024-25 work plan development

**Investing in our future workforce through
today's young generation.**

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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 that integrating Vocational Education Training in Secondary Schools (VETSS) with an equal weighting to Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR), is the best solution to enhancing gender diversity in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) trades, and lift numbers of the overall cohort pursuing a STEM career. The benefits include better equipped personnel entering the workforce, enhanced aptitude and competency screening, heightened attraction and retention, younger age of commencing apprentices, and greater diversity in the workplace through early exposure in a supportive environment. MEA sees this as the pivotal role in actioning societal, structural and systemic change. We believe this will lead to enhanced economic prosperity for a diverse workforce as we expect to see better aptitude screening resulting in better greater career longevity. We agree that “*consideration should be given [to] development of secondary school curriculum (including but not limited to VET in schools course offerings and an emphasis on STEM subjects*”¹. By addressing the skills shortage crisis at the secondary school level, we will believe we will be more effectively “*addressing the skills shortages and proactively building a strong and skilled labour force*”².

As representatives of licenced electrical contractors across Australia, our response is focused on improving VET delivery for STEM trades and boosting the number of young Australians choosing a STEM career in trades.

Mission

Q1. What are the most important and valuable topics for Jobs and Skills Australia to work on – big or small?

Throughout many submissions, MEA has strongly advocated for Federal and State Governments to redirect existing investment of public VET funding towards streamlining and integrating VET courses into the secondary school curriculum with an equal weighting to ATAR.

The current schooling system primarily moulds students to fit an academic structure, leaving behind those who are unwilling or unable to conform. Secondary Schools are incentivised almost entirely on their ability to produce ATAR rankings, and other metrics of success (including VET qualifications attained and employment outcomes) need to be established to set funding and resourcing benchmarks for schools, if schools are going to continue to be the engine that provides productive citizens to fuel the economy and support our way of life.

VETSS exposure and targeted training provides all students equal opportunities for future success by cultivating a supportive and encouraging environment and exposing a greater cohort of students to STEM careers at an earlier age. It will cultivate both soft skills that are transferable within the STEM industry and specialised skills relevant towards specific trades, which is important following the Australian Government’s announcement that “increased focus on transferable skills, resilience and adaptability are viewed by stakeholders as increasingly important in a rapidly changing labour market”³.

¹Australian Government, ‘Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023’, [October 2023], 81.

² Australian Treasury, ‘5 Filling skills needs and building our future workforce (Employment White Paper)’, [2023], 1.

³ (n1), 20.



Greater Attraction and Retention

The Australian Government reported NCVET's statistics that *"fewer than half of commenced VET qualifications are completed, and around 60% of apprenticeships are completed"*⁴. MEA advocates that one of VETSS benefits includes better equipped personnel entering the workforce and enhanced aptitude and competency screening which leads to heightened attraction and retention in the workplace through early exposure in a supportive environment. *"The most common reason for qualification non-completion [is] changing or commencing a new job"*⁵. VETSS allows for greater matching of skills to a STEM trade which can lead to greater attraction and retention in the workforce as competency often leads to greater job satisfaction.

Investing in aptitude and competency at the school level will put many Australians on the first rung of the ladder of success in a rewarding career. All other initiatives and campaigns will potentially be limited in effectiveness and become a less effective use of precious taxpayer money.

Diversity and Remote Regions

We believe VETSS will embed long-term systemic change towards improving diversity amongst STEM trade workforces. All students, regardless of their diversity (i.e. gender, culture, location (i.e. remote and rural school students), disabilities, etc) are exposed to STEM trades in an environment where VET is normalised to the same extent as an ATAR path. When students who are considered 'diverse' in STEM trades are provided the equal opportunity to experience VET in a supportive environment, we can expect to see a greater diversity in STEM trades as perceptions and stereotypes change. This inherently leads to a larger pool of skilled labour in the STEM workforce.

Through VETSS, all students regardless of geographical location will be exposed to VET courses which is likely to lead to a larger number of students going out of their way to continue tertiary training in STEM trades, having already piqued their interest and initiated skills development in a career suited to them. The use of digital Learning Management Systems also means that content for prevocational Cert I and II courses can be delivered largely online, helping to defeat the isolation challenges of remote and regional locations.

Electrification

MEA are strong advocates for electrification through consumer energy resources (CER) and the importance of utilising private licenced electrical contractors for their installation and maintenance. As a representative body of small and medium electrical contracting businesses across urban and regional Australia we understand that electrification is only going to add pressure to an already existing skills shortage crisis, which is why we believe VETSS is an essential key solution. Without a strong proactive response to skills shortages both currently existing and forecast, we risk continued attraction and retention issues. We believe VETSS provides opportunities for enhanced aptitude and competency screening to ensure all students are best matched with the correct trade for them, thereby enhancing not only attraction and retention rates in the electrical industry, but all industries.

Delivering on our Mission and Role

Q2. What are your views on how Jobs and Skills Australia can best deliver on our mission – to be a catalyst in activating the potential of Australia's human capital to meet present and future skills needs – and our legislated functions?

⁴ (n1), 93.

⁵ (n1), 93.

In addition to our response regarding integration of VETSS under Q1, continuing to collaborate with industry stakeholders (such as employers, representative groups, training organisations) will ensure Jobs and Skills Australia are operating from timely relevant data reflective of industry needs. These Stakeholders are at the forefront of the crisis with the greatest exposure and therefore knowledge of what is required.

We stand resolute in advocating that we need to invest in our future workforce through today’s younger generation. We call this approach *Back To The Future* as it basically reprises the practice until the 1980s of students beginning their VET career journey at the end of years 9 or 10, albeit with more educational support and mentoring, as students remain in school until the end of Year 12. *“The transition [to electrification] will not be possible without a workforce that is equipped with the right skills”*⁶. Electricians and are listed as one of the top 20 occupations in demand with longer training gaps⁷ and considered *“critically important”*⁸ in the clean energy transformation. Electrification is going to give rise to added pressures to the current job skills crisis and it is important we not only develop a core work force to deliver the implementation of CER assets, but also workforce to continue repairs and maintenance in the long-term.

Q3. What issues, topics and research questions, studies, projects would you suggest Jobs and skills Australia explores as part of our 2024-25 work plan?

Integrated and streamlined vocational and education training in secondary schools with an equal weighting to ATAR subjects.

Towards a National Jobs and Skills Roadmap

Q4. How can we collaboratively work towards a national jobs and skills roadmap as outlined in the Annual Jobs and Skills Report 2023?

Continued collaboration with key industry stakeholders (such as employer groups, unions, RTOs and GTOs) to identify industry gaps and identify trends in suggested solutions. This will ensure government’s response is directly relevant to key issues and informed by the market.

Q5. Which of the 14 potential roadmap opportunities do you consider the most important in the short term?

Opportunity number 9: *“Supporting the net zero transition challenge by charting a roadmap for education, training and migration to make that transition successful, in partnership with the new Net Zero Authority”*.

MEA have been heavily involved in advocating for CER/electrification through multiple State and Federal consultations. We have highlighted throughout these submissions that the skills shortage is going to be a key barrier to cohesive and efficient implementation (in the short-term) and repairs and maintenance (in the long-term).

*“Reform of the school system to place greater value on vocational skills, and enabling pathways for lifelong learning, is required to support the cultural change needed”*⁹ to alter negative stereotypes which contributes to reduced STEM trade attraction rates. VETSS is highlight likely to create systemic and societal change in these perceptions. Exposure and targeted training of VETSS provides all students equal opportunities for future success by cultivating a supportive, informative and encouraging environment. *“A key challenge of the VET sector is its status and*

⁶ (n1), 42.
⁷ (n1), 16.
⁸ (n1), 19.
⁹(n1), 20.



*perceptions relative to higher education*¹⁰ however, STEM careers will become normalised alongside corporate/academic careers (which is developed through ATAR subjects at school) thereby improving its perception compared to higher education. VETSS provides students, who might otherwise be disengaged from their schooling, to participate and work towards a successful career upon immediately leaving school; the same opportunity provided to ATAR students working towards a corporate job.

Q6. Which of the 14 potential roadmap opportunities would have the most impact on your own work?

We believe the following three opportunities would have the most impact on our members in the industry:

- #3: Support the reform of VET, higher education and migration systems by providing advice and analysis and monitoring achievement of progress against their objectives.
- #6: “Identifying VET qualifications which if completed alongside higher education qualification would enhance graduate employability”.
- #9: “Supporting the net zero transition challenge by charting a roadmap for education, training and migration to make that transition successful, in partnership with the new Net Zero Authority”.

Please refer to our response under Q5 for our reasoning.

We further highlight that there are well established pathways in VET to attain higher qualifications at Diploma and Advanced Diploma level, satisfying pre-requisites and RPL for Tertiary Degree qualifications.

Q7. Are there any changes to or additional roadmap opportunities that you would like to see (i.e. what is missing)?

We believe that there is a much greater role for the use of Group Training Organisations (GTOs) to be included in the roadmap to work in partnership with schools and employers. The GTO model with higher completion rates due to a range of factors¹¹, is well placed to support employment of Apprentices for Small to Medium Enterprises (SME’s) who are the largest cohort of employers of apprentices and trainees in the country, in a way that de-risks their investment. We urge JSA to engage with the GTO sector to complement the proposed strategy.

Q8. What new or additional issues/questions would you suggest we explore to expand the evidence base required to progress the potential roadmap opportunities and achieve the strategic objectives of the national job and skills roadmap?

Whilst we appreciate the opportunities listed are broad and can include VETSS, we submit issues/questions specific to VETSS with its own separate agenda is to be included. This will ensure sufficient attention is given to the matter and not wrapped up as a side-factor in the bigger scheme of tertiary VET training. It is critical we provide meaningful and integrated access to VET for all secondary school students to maximise the positive impact all other VET/STEM initiatives have.

¹⁰ (n1), 20.

¹¹ “Completion rates for group training organisations and direct employers: how do they compare?”, NCVET, [11 October 2023], <<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/completion-rates-for-group-training-organisations-and-direct-employers-how-do-they-compare>>

Key Outcomes and Priorities

Q9. Is there anything else you would like to tell us, to contribute to the development of the key outcomes and priorities for Jobs and Skills Australia's 2024-25 work plan?

Please see our responses under Qs 1-8.



Conclusion

MEA strongly advocate for government to prioritise its funding into VETSS to provide a sustainable and meaningful solution to the skills shortage crisis and lack of diversity in STEM trades. By streamlining and integrating VET into the secondary school curriculum, with an equal weighting to ATAR, we can expect to see a steady systemic and societal change to the perception of STEM trade careers and the diversity within its skilled pool of labour. Integrated and equal VETSS will expose all students, regardless of diversity and personal circumstance, to pursue STEM trade opportunities, so desperately needed to fuel the productivity of the nation. It will allow those who do not wish to pursue ATAR subjects the same opportunities as those developing an academic/office career to begin pursuing the trade jobs at an earlier school age. It is time to change the narrative and begin emphasising the benefits and inclusiveness of STEM trades. Without cultivating this change at a younger impressionable age, we cannot expect to see the skills shortage and diversity issues resolved, and in many respects worsen.

MEA believes that first investing in measuring aptitude and competency at school levels and matching these to career opportunities, puts the greatest amount Australians (regardless of their background) on the ladder of success to a rewarding and productive career. All other initiatives and campaigns will inherently be limited in effectiveness and become a less effective use of precious taxpayer money.