



Lead.**Connect.**

POSITIVE FUTURES: Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Queensland

Submission from Master Electricians Australia



About Master Electricians Australia

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.

As MEA is not a direct employer of apprentices, we will be focusing our responses on feedback from members and our own industry knowledge.

Responses

1. Why has there been a rise in older workers entering apprenticeships and what are the benefits as a result?

Mature aged apprentices bring benefits to employers such as knowledge of the workforce, respect for their responsibilities as an employee, transferrable skills and experience. This in turn promotes efficiency for the employer, and productivity may increase.

2. How would you strengthen the role of apprenticeships and traineeships as a pathway to employment for young people?

Vocational pathways should be consistently promoted throughout high schools, as strongly as the university streams are. Apprenticeships and traineeships offer a number of advantages over the university pathway that schools need to more actively communicate to students, including being paid to learn and having a practical skill that is in high demand. Industry associations, such as Master Electricians Australia, could be engaged by schools to provide information to students about particular trades and be a future point of contact for interested students.

3. How would you increase the diversity of people undertaking apprenticeships and traineeships?

The electrical industry is largely male dominated with a small number of female apprentices entering the system due, in some part, to the traditional image of trades as being unsuitable for women. Programs such as MEA's Women in Contracting (WiC) are the types of tools that can make trade apprenticeships more attractive to women. The women involved in WiC are in the position to change the perception of the electrical trade to one that aspires to create a level playing field in a male dominated industry. The introduction and promotion of initiatives such as WiC across male dominated trades is one strategy to increase diversity and encourage more women to undertake a trade apprenticeship.

4. How could the flexibilities of the apprenticeship and traineeship system be further explained to industry and employers?

Small business employers often lack the time needed to investigate the alternative apprenticeship paths available beyond the traditional time based progression that has

been in place for so long. These business owners will opt for what they know with a primary focus on keeping their business profitable in a volatile economy. Employers need to be made aware of the existence of flexible options and importantly the direct benefits to their business. Employer organisations are the ideal source for this information. Employer groups are a trusted, unbiased source of information for members with various means of communication at their disposal.

Apprentice mentoring programs are another useful tool to explain the flexibilities of an apprenticeship to employers. It can be daunting for an employer to navigate a new flexible apprenticeship system when they are so accustomed to the traditional apprenticeship path. Apprentice mentors can provide the necessary guidance and support on a one-on-one basis for employers from recruitment and sign up to completion. We would encourage further funding and promotion of apprentice mentoring programs for industry.

5. In your opinion, what is the purpose of the apprenticeship and traineeship system?

From MEA's perspective, the purpose of the apprenticeship system is to produce fully qualified and competent tradespeople. The system should also be designed to support employers who take time out of their business to train unskilled workers and guide them through to completion.

6. What role have incentives played in your interaction with the apprenticeship and traineeship system?

MEA is not a direct employer of apprentices, however, in engaging with our electrical contractor members we are aware that the incentives can encourage employers to take on apprentices. However, navigating the system in order to receive these incentives can act as a deterrent.

Unfortunately, financial support for employers of apprentices and trainees has been substantially reduced over the past five years, including Support for Mature Aged Apprentices, Reimbursement of College Tuition Fees and Support for Tools of the Trade. This is in addition to changes under the Award increasing an employer's financial responsibilities for apprentice tools, tuition fees and wages. These are just some of the many incentive changes which have affected employers' ability to financially commit to employing apprentices.

7. Have particular aspects of the incentives schemes influenced you more than others?

The incentive schemes that are more likely to appeal to electrical contractors include:

- *Employer support for purchasing apprentice tools*

This support was previously provided to apprentices, however, there was concern over where the money was being spent. Apprentices were then provided with wholesaler 'gift cards', however suppliers complained about the administration surrounding the process. There would be benefit in providing employers with the support payment to purchase the apprentice tool kit from commencement.

- *Reimbursement of Tuition Fees*

The Electrotechnology Sector Award now specifies employers are responsible for the payment of apprentice tuition fees (provided they successfully complete). This is an additional cost the employer has been required to bear. For an employer of five apprentices, they could pay up to \$10 000 in apprentice college fees.

- *Apprentices aged 21 – 24years*

Apprentices aged 21-24 years are paid at mature-aged apprentice rates under the Award. However the Government incentive for mature-aged apprentices is only made available if the apprentice is 25 years or over on the date of apprenticeship commencement. The Support for Mature Aged Apprentices incentive should be made available to employers of apprentices 21 years and over to coincide with the wage increase.

8. How could the incentives available be best understood by industry and employers?

As discussed above, an apprentice mentor able to provide one-on-one guidance to an employer is one means to have these incentives explained. Again, engagement with employer groups would also allow information about incentives to be distributed and understood by employers. Specialist industry associations, such as Master Electricians Australia, are ideally placed to educate employers on the incentives available, eligibility criteria and how to access them.

9. In what way could incentives assist with the creation of new jobs or productivity improvements in your business or industry?

It follows that more incentives will encourage more employers to take on apprentices leading to more jobs and greater productivity.

10. Do you use training methods that include work based learning (e.g. apprenticeships and traineeships) or institutional pathways (e.g. Certificate 3 Guarantee)? Why?

Members have indicated that they have utilised pathways such as the “Trades Future” learning platform.

11. Are there features of your business/industry which impacts on the employment of apprentices or trainees?

The inherent dangers associated with electricity and the complexities of the work involved mean that employers in the electrical industry need to invest significant amounts of time in ensuring an apprentice is conducting work safely. As such, employers must be confident that any apprentice they take on has competent levels of Language, Literacy and Numeracy (LLN) as a base before they take on the more technical aspects of electrical work. Unfortunately, small business employers do not always have the time to dedicate to focused recruitment to screen apprentices for LLN competencies which can cause problems down the line if an apprentice is found to not possess these skills.

In addition, the sometimes cyclical nature of activity the construction industry means that employers may not be willing to take on an apprentice directly given the uncertainty of work available.

12. Can you describe any initiatives introduced to address them?

Asbestos Awareness Training, as offered through Master Electricians Safety, can provide apprentices with the knowledge they need to identify and work safely with asbestos or asbestos containing material. It would be beneficial for further government funding to be provided to ensure more of these initiatives could be made available to apprentices.

13. What would make apprenticeships and traineeships more attractive to your industry?

Competency based progression

Competency based progression for electrical apprenticeships would make apprenticeships more attractive to industry. It is well established that an apprentice do not become profitable for a business until their third year of training. If apprentices could progress through their training at a faster rate, an employer would benefit from a more productive employee.

Competency completion, as opposed to the traditional time based 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. This system would also allow those apprentices who have not yet achieved the necessary competencies within a certain period of time to continue with their apprenticeship training in order to bring them up to the required standard.

A competency based system benefits employers by facilitating apprentices with more advanced skills becoming qualified tradespeople sooner, thereby addressing skills shortages and opening up the opportunity for new apprentices to enter the system as others become qualified. Equally, this system would provide further opportunity for apprentices who have not yet achieved competency by a training contract end date to engage in additional training in order to reach a licensed outcome. In this respect the system would ensure that every apprentice completes his/her qualification with all of the skills and knowledge required to perform the full scope of electrical work for the public with no compromise to electrical safety.

Front load training

MEA would encourage government to invest additional resources into exploring alternate pathways for apprentices, such as front load training, as a means to make apprenticeships more attractive to industry.

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 skills 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.

Incentive support

Key incentive support we suggest may be introduced / reintroduced to support the employment of apprentices are detailed above at question seven.

14. What are the key success factors in the completion of apprenticeships and traineeships?

A key success factor in the completion of apprenticeships and traineeships is effective recruitment which focuses on recruiting the right fit for the right employer as well as qualification for the trade and industry.

It is also important to ensure apprentices are provided the support and mentorship throughout their apprenticeship to support their on-the-job training, off-the-job training and general workplace challenges. Providing employers access to affordable recruitment and mentorship services has proven successful for apprenticeship completion outcomes.

15. What support is important in assisting small to medium businesses participate successfully in the apprenticeship and traineeship system?

Key challenges faced by small to medium employers include financial management, continuity of workflow and human resources management.

The added pressure of a constantly changing apprenticeship system is a further challenge, particularly for employers who are not constantly highly engaged in the system. The volume of stakeholders, interested parties and processes cause confusion and disruption to business. Again, apprentice mentoring is a key measure in order to overcome these obstacles, particularly for small to medium businesses.

16. What would be needed for larger employers to increase engagement with the system?

Larger employers within the electrical sector, particularly construction focused employers, have the challenge of project driven workforce planning. For example, an employer may increase their workforce by 100+ employees on a project for 12 months and then need to demobilise the workforce at projects end. This inconsistency of workflow results in a high level of group training apprentices within this sector. For this reason, larger employers need flexibility in the apprenticeship system to accommodate their fluctuating work demands and diverse workforce.

17. How would you define quality in an apprenticeship and traineeship system?

Apprentices and trainees able to achieve a fully licensed outcome at the completion of their training and employers who welcome the opportunity to take on apprentices due to the benefits they offer to a business.

18. Are you satisfied with the current apprenticeship and traineeship system? Why?

We would like to see a more flexible apprenticeship system that can meet the differing learning styles and progression rates of each apprentice to ensure higher quality apprentices graduating from the system.

19. What strategies could further improve the quality of the current system?

In addition to the strategies listed at question 13, we recommend the following:

- *Apprenticeship administrative burden*

The process of employing an apprentice can be complex and time consuming for an employer. There are a number of steps involved from finding a suitable applicant, working with an Australian Apprentice Centre to lodge a training contract and complete a training plan and navigating eligibility for the government incentives and subsidies available. All of this before any kind of training begins. These administrative processes are on top of the standard steps that must be followed when a new employee is taken on, making the hiring of an apprentice even more daunting for a small business or sole trader. MEA proposes a streamlined system with a central repository of incentives to ease the administrative burden for small business.

- *Apprentice Training*

It is an ever increasing problem that electrical apprentices are not receiving the level of training through Registered Training Providers (RTOs) that is required in order for them to become fully competent tradespeople. As a result, the businesses who take on these apprentices must fill the gaps to ensure the apprentice can perform work safely and efficiently. While larger businesses may have capacity to invest time and money in supplementary training for apprentices, small businesses do not have this luxury. Employing an apprentice is costly enough for employers. In fact, it is widely acknowledged that apprentices do not become profitable for a business until their third or fourth year. When a small business is then expected to invest more resources in basic training for an apprentice in those first few pivotal years, this eats even more profit out of a small business' bottom line.

To better support small businesses that take on apprentices, training regulators across Australia need to utilise their monitoring and enforcement tools and ensure that all RTOs facilitate training to the standard required to deliver competent tradespersons. This may involve regulators conducting audits on a regular basis to confirm that all of the training elements of an electrical apprenticeship are being delivered consistently by all RTOs. Such audits would also be an opportunity to ensure the information provided in training packages is up-to-date with current practices. These processes could give confidence to small businesses that they can rely on the training provided by RTOs and would also allow the employer to focus on providing opportunities for the apprentice to apply their skills in a real world environment.

- *Government to engage industry and encourage innovation*

It is critical that government engage with industry when exploring any alternative pathways for apprenticeships. We recommend that government offer more funding programs, such as the Department of Education and Training's *Apprentice Training – alternative delivery pilots*, to facilitate industry being able to develop innovative programs to boost completion rates and encourage more employers to engage apprentices.

An example of a program proposed by MEA is the *Electrical Training Breakthrough Program* which is designed to address the many issues hindering electrical contractors employing a first year apprentice. The program aims to select students who have the inherent ability to successfully complete the full-time course and gain the theoretical and practical skills to exit an early second year apprentice level. This involves combining formal off-the-job training and practical training under the supervision of teaching staff at various RTOs to provide full-time students with a quality, well rounded and industry endorsed program.

- *External capstone testing*

On 27 February 2012, 20 year old trade assistant, Jason Garrels, was electrocuted whilst working on a Queensland building site when a temporary switchboard he had been carrying came into contact with live wires. This tragic event prompted concerns about the flaws in the assessment system for electrical apprentices, namely, Capstone Testing.

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 general public. We therefore recommend that all states require external capstone testing for electrical apprentices. This would undoubtedly improve the quality of the apprenticeship system.

- *Upgrade Electrotechnology qualification*

MEA recommends that the qualification for an electrician be upgraded from the current Certificate III in Electrotechnology to, at a minimum, a Certificate IV or ideally the Diploma or even Advanced Diploma level as a means to improve the quality of the apprenticeship system.

As technology advances and the demand for energy efficient and digital technologies grows, the skills set expected of an electrician has broadened significantly, with consumers requiring more than just the traditional installation of power points and light fixtures. The qualification awarded to those who successfully complete training in these areas should reflect the level of skill and expertise they need to be able to show competencies in.

Further to this, every apprentice who completes their qualification should have been able to demonstrate competency in the full range of tasks associated with electrical work. All

electricians need to understand every element of the work they undertake in order to perform quality work safely.

Upgrading the electrotechnology qualification would improve the quality of apprenticeships and heighten the professionalism of the industry as a whole.

20. What is your awareness of, or experience with, pre-employment apprenticeship and traineeship programs?

Pre-apprenticeship training provides aspiring apprentices with exposure to the industry and an understanding of what to expect in college training. MEA supports pre-apprenticeship training as a pre-employment pathway.

21. Do you value these programs as a pre-employment pathway? Why?

Yes. This is particularly the case for high risk trades such as electrical as a means to prepare apprentices for the level of skill and dedication involved in a particular trade.

22. What would enhance the value of pre-employment apprenticeship and traineeship programs for both employers and participants?

More industry consultation to identify what standards are expected when an apprenticeship begins so that these programs can provide these skills.

23. What has been your experience with school-based apprenticeships and traineeships?

The electrical industry, given the high level of safety requirements, has not been actively in support of school-based apprenticeships. We have seen these opportunities decrease within our sector over the past years with employers highly conscious of ensuring their employees are not open to risk.

24. How has the school-based apprenticeship and traineeship system met your needs?

An issue encountered by our members with the school-based apprenticeship system is the lack of flexibility it offers. The traditional time based system, particularly in the case of a school based apprenticeship, is not always attractive to employers who cannot dedicate significant amounts of time to training a school based apprentice.

25. Please provide examples of school-based apprenticeships and traineeships proving to be a valuable employment pathway.

School based apprenticeships can be valuable by allowing employers to “test the waters” with an apprentice in order to ascertain their suitability and aptitude for the electrical trade. They also provide apprentices with the information and experience needed to make a choice about their future in the electrical industry.

26. What enhancements would you suggest to school-based apprenticeships and traineeships?

As indicated above, greater flexibility in school based apprenticeships would be of benefit to all participants.

27. To what extent is increased specialisation a feature of your industry?

Within the electrotechnology sector, technology is rapidly evolving, increasing the options for specialisation across the industry.

28. How is this affecting your participation in the apprenticeship and traineeship system?

The qualification content has struggled to maintain currency with these changes, and training has fallen behind industry advancement.

29. What is the tolerance of industry to the use of simulation within the apprenticeship and traineeship system?

Given the high risk nature of the electrical industry, the use of simulation is fully supported in order to protect the safety of apprentices and the public. Having the opportunity for apprentices to work with electricity in a safe environment allows them to identify and counteract risks before experiencing them in real life situations.

30. How is technology changing the training requirements of apprentices and trainees in your industry?

Changing technology necessitates training content to be more actively and regularly updated.

31. What changes could assist apprenticeships and traineeships continue to meet the challenges of technological change?

Active consultation with industry to provide the apprenticeship system with up to date information on the changes occurring in the industry and what employers need from apprentices.

MEA would welcome the opportunity to contribute further to the discussion on improving the apprenticeship and traineeship system in Queensland.

Yours faithfully,



Malcolm Richards
CEO