

Reform of the Australian Apprenticeships Support Services

Submission Response

Instructions for completion

Please keep your response as concise as possible, we recommend approximately **1 page per section**.

If you have a comment about a particular element of the apprenticeship process, please place that in the relevant section.

Submissions should be emailed to aassreform@innovation.gov.au by 5pm 31 July 2013.

Please note:

The Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education ('the department') may publish all submissions for public review on the department's website and may include submissions in reports or materials published by the department.

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Organisation name: Master Electricians Australia

General Overview

Overall Master Electricians Australia (MEA) welcomes reform of the Australian Apprenticeship Support Services system. However, we are concerned that the nationalised approach may not be able to provide the kind of targeted support required by employers and Australian Apprentices in specific sectors, namely the energy industry. For this reason we encourage government to accommodate for industry groups in the more challenging trades to provide supplementary services to those participating in the system.

Information and Marketing - Specific Comments

Should marketing for Australian Apprenticeships be focused at the national level? Who should provide this service? What information needs to be available?

Under a harmonised system, the marketing and dissemination of information on Australian Apprenticeships should have a national focus. MEA would support this generic information being distributed by the department, as long as the providers and industry are actively consulted and given the opportunity to contribute input. This functionality would ensure consistency of information is being disseminated and would further reduce the administrative burden upon providers.

Information made available should include:

- What is an Australian Apprenticeship;
- What is the process to engage in or employ an Australian Apprentice;
- Incentives available for the Australian Apprentice and the employer;
- Roles of the relevant bodies involved in an Australian Apprenticeship, i.e. “who’s who in the zoo”;
- Support services available; and
- A central point of contact.

Is there a need for local regional and/or industry-specific Australian Apprenticeship information? Whose responsibility should it be to provide this?

Whilst a national focus is important, there are local as well as industry specific issues that cannot be ignored. For prospective Energy Apprentices it is imperative that they have access to specific information on what can be a challenging and demanding industry. This will likely necessitate the involvement of industry groups to provide this kind of detailed information.

Providers should have an obligation to provide this advice through appropriate channels such as traditional marketing methods and with a strong focus on social and electronic media.

How should marketing reflect national/local areas of skills needs?

Marketing should reflect the needs of the region and its relevant industries. Providers would need to engage with local businesses and industry groups to ensure they are obtaining useful market research to design and produce marketing resources.

Is there information which is currently not provided but would be useful for potential Australian Apprentices and employers?

Currently, the information provided is generic and MEA considers this to be of a satisfactory level. However, the information gap lies in industry specific information such as regulatory considerations and, for some Australian Apprenticeship pathways, the vocation specific detail is often overlooked. This a particular concern for electrical occupations that are unique in the level of technical knowledge and skill necessary to complete a qualification. For example, many prospective electrical apprentices underestimate the standard of mathematics competency required in order to undertake a career in energy and this has an adverse impact on retention and completion rates. This is one of a number of trade specific information that potential Apprentices need to be made aware of. It is therefore critical that industry expertise be utilised in the formulation and distribution of specific information to ensure that apprentices are made aware of the base knowledge and skill set they must possess if they wish to complete an electrical apprenticeship.

What specific social media tools are most effective for either providing information to current Australian Apprentices, or promoting Australian Apprenticeships to potential Australian Apprentices to enable them to engage with the Australian Apprenticeships system?

Effective social media tools include websites, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. MEA has been running a Commonwealth funded Apprentice Advisors project and we have found these social media channels to be highly successful in disseminating information to potential Apprentices and our industry sector. However, we are also mindful that these social media tools, while an effective starting point, must be supplemented by access to “real people” who will be able to provide more personalised advice and guidance to potential and existing Australian Apprentices. This personalised contact is particularly important for Electrical Apprenticeships, given the inherent difficulty and complexity of the trade.

Pre Sign up - Specific Comments

Who is best placed to ensure that potential Australian Apprentices are enrolled in the correct qualification? How much support and information do those organisations familiar with the Australian Apprenticeships system require?

Currently, industry associations and Registered Training Organisations (RTO) play a pivotal role in ensuring the correct qualification is entered into. There have been many instances within the energy industry where an Apprentice has been signed up into an incorrect qualification and it has not been identified by any party until it is too late and four years has been wasted with no outcome. This can have an adverse impact on both the Australian Apprentice and their employer. The Apprentice has a qualification they don't want with the employer put in the difficult position of being unable to provide the right guidance to an Apprentice who they may have anticipated would play a role in the growth of their business.

It is also important to acknowledge that it is impossible to expect one organisation to hold current and accurate information about all Australian Apprenticeship pathways to impart on a daily basis. Engagement of Industry Associations who live and breathe the requirements of their sectors is essential. Given its inherent safety risks and complex licensing requirements, the Electrical Apprenticeship pathway in particular could suffer if expert information is not readily available. From our experience supporting Electrical Apprentices and their employers through the ApprenticeConnect Mentors and Advisors projects, targeted support from industry experts is the most effective means to achieve a successful completion. MEA's ApprenticeConnect retention statistics when compared to the industry average speak for themselves. Apprenticeships that are serviced by ApprenticeConnect boast an 82% contract of training retention rate within the program. This is well above the industry standard of 66%.

In terms of the level of support, organisations that have traditionally employed Australian Apprentices over many years need minimal support and assistance with the Australian Apprenticeship system. They often understand their workplace requirements and will have established relationships through their RTO. Having said this, MEA have found employers with an in-depth understanding still require support through mentoring – both for their Australian Apprentices and for themselves. We would like to see a level of flexibility in a harmonised system that would allow all organisations, regardless of their experience with the system, to readily access targeted advice and support on a needs basis.

How do we ensure engagement with Australian Apprenticeships by equity groups? To what extent could this be achieved on a local/regional/state or national level?

MEA supports engagement of equity groups on all levels. Unfortunately, as the Government would be aware, engagement of all equity groups could be improved. MEA recommends a nationally led forum with all stakeholders to develop a strategy to assist employers to increase engagement of Australian Apprentices who fall within these equity groups.

With a national agenda engaging with all stakeholders to facilitate 'buy in' it is reasonable to expect an increase in engagement with Australian Apprenticeships by these equity groups.

Matching - Specific Comments

Would a national vacancy website be effective for employer/Australian Apprentice matching?

Currently there is a national vacancy website that MEA is a partner of, www.apprenticeshipscentral.com.au. This resource is extremely effective and is provided by a not-for-profit community organisation as a tool to encourage Apprenticeship engagement.

The website has been developed by Busy@Work as a community service to provide employers, schools, parents and students with current information regarding Australian Apprenticeships. There are a range of tools available to assist all members of the community including a vacancy board that currently has over 160 Australian Apprenticeship opportunities listed. This website has been in development for the past 18 months, with industry partners such as MEA now engaging to ensure industry specific information is available and accurate.

SME's will find the information particularly useful and the tools available will be valuable as many SME's do not have these available within their business.

What other strategies could be used to improve matching services?

Many small businesses do not have the time or resources to undertake a comprehensive recruitment process when engaging an Australian Apprentice. In communicating with our membership base it has become clear that the vast majority of electrical contractors undertake no formal recruitment practices when employing an Electrical Apprentice. The preferred option is word of mouth or drawing on existing contacts. In fact, research indicates 59% of Electrical Contractors recruit via word of mouth with no suitability assessments undertaken (*Electrical Contractors Association and Energy Skills Qld Joint Survey, 2009*). Any strategy would be an improvement upon the current ad-hoc practices currently employed across all industries.

MEA's ApprenticeConnect program provides recruitment support for participating employers and this certainly plays a role in the high retention and completion rates achieved through this program. It is again important to note that due to the challenging nature of Electrical Training Package, targeted recruitment is essential to maximise the chances of an Apprentice completing their four years.

Sign Up - Specific Comments

What tools and information are required to ensure that the majority of employers are able to self-service through AAMS? What are the risks? How can these risks be mitigated?

MEA supports employers having the option to self-service when employing an Australian Apprentice. We feel this will be successful with those employers who have previously been exposed to the Australian Apprenticeship system and are well versed in their entitlements and obligations.

For smaller employers with limited exposure to the Australian Apprenticeships system, self-service will be less effective. There is likely to be a high risk of training contracts not being registered and incentives not being claimed. To mitigate these risks, MEA suggests that a comprehensive user guide in both hard and electronic formats be made available to employers. We also recommend an online tutorial be formulated for those employers who wish to undertake this service themselves but still require basic training. This could be supplemented with a business hours hotline for employers needing more specific assistance. We also recommend that, on request from an employer, the service provider facilitate a face to face sign up or tutorial session.

Do all employers need a face to face support component? Should employers new to the Australian Apprenticeships system automatically require additional engagement?

Not all employers require face to face support for sign up. Group Training Organisations and those employers who have a vested interest in training their staff are generally fluent in the Australian Apprenticeships system and are unlikely to require intensive engagement.

MEA believe all new employers should automatically receive face to face engagement. This may be a 'one off' or ongoing interaction dependant on the needs of each individual employer.

What are the additional support needs of employers likely to be? How can these be addressed?

MEA have offered management and mentoring service for members and their Apprentices since 2007 through the ApprenticeConnect mentoring program. From our experience, we have found employers require advice on basic employment issues such as wages and human resources as well as support in claiming government incentives. These businesses also value the support of ApprenticeConnect in booking off-the-job training for their Apprentice/s and managing the electronic profiling system that is essential for a successful licensing outcome.

Does current AASS sufficiently cater to the needs of SMEs? How could this be improved?

No. It is a one size fits all system. These reforms provide an opportunity to provide the much needed support for SMEs, particularly those in industries with specific regulatory requirements. The majority of SME employers having limited time and/or resources to dedicate to monitoring the administration of an Australian Apprenticeship. Ideally, AASS would have the inherent flexibility to meet with these employers at a time that suits them to provide the advice they sorely need.

Would the establishment of a self-service model potentially isolate SME's who don't have dedicated HR staff?

A one size fits all self-service model does have the potential to isolate SME's and we are not confident such a system would work. If SME's had an option to either self-service or have a face to face service this would alleviate the pressure they can experience.

Is it necessary for the same organisation which provides on the ground sign up support, to also be the organisation which provides ongoing support to Australian Apprentices and employers throughout their Australian Apprenticeship?

It is preferable for one organisation to be a central source of support from sign-up and to continue throughout the course of an Apprenticeship to make it easier for Apprentices and employers to navigate their way through the system. However, in order for this to be effective it is imperative that industry be involved. From our experience, many AASSs providers do not possess the breadth of knowledge to support employers in differing industries throughout the course of an Apprenticeship, particularly for licensed trades such as electrical. The industry involvement required could range from consultation and advice and span through to provision of key services such as Apprentice mentoring. The success of a central source of support throughout the course of an Apprenticeship is evident in the high completion rates achieved through MEA's ApprenticeConnect.

Ongoing support to completion - Specific Comments

What are the service standards that should be required for ongoing and intensive support?

Intensive support should include regular face to face contact visits every 4-6 weeks from a suitably qualified mentor. The services delivered for intensive support should be tailored to the needs of each individual.

It is also imperative that the needs of the employer not be overlooked. Intensive support for employers should be a consideration for future services.

What are the skills which would be required to undertake the support/case worker role? Should these be specified as contractual obligations by the Australian Government?

Qualifications for support/case workers need not be trade specific. In fact, from our experience, support provided by a case worker who only possesses a trade background can be ineffective. From our experience recruiting Apprentice Mentors for the ApprenticeConnect program, a combination of VETE and social services experience are the most desirable skills for this type of role. We would support a minimum qualification/experience level being specified in the contracts of service for providers to ensure a consistent standard is provided.

Also of note is that RTO's are responsible for providing off-the-job training and validating on-the-job training. RTO's employ trade qualified staff to perform this specific role for Australian Apprentices and this compliments the mentoring provided by staff with a social services/VETE background.

Is a modified version of the JSCI the correct tool for quantitative assessment? What other options are there for identifying those at risk?

MEA consider the JSCI to be a useful quantitative tool to determine support levels. However, employers and Australian Apprentices must retain the option to request support on a needs basis.

Are there any risk factors that are specific to Australian Apprenticeships over job seekers?

In MEA's experience, the risk factors for Australian Apprentices and Job Seekers are similar, with a few key differences, namely:

- Differing levels of access to off-the-job training for Australian Apprentices can hinder completion, for example when RTO's do not have places available or when an employer restricts attendance;
- On the job issues for Australian Apprentices, such as communication breakdown and workplace bullying and harassment create a risk of an Apprentice not completing.

Is there a need for funding to be made available to purchase additional services, such as tutoring, for those at risk?

MEA are very supportive of additional tutorial support being available through a third party. We have found from our experience that whilst RTO's are obligated to provide tutorial support to Australian Apprentices often they don't receive it or find it difficult to access the support available.

Would baseline support need to be delivered on a regional basis? Could it be provided through a centralised helpline?

Often regional centres are overlooked when the needs of Australian Apprentices are the same and often amplified in regional areas. A helpline would not be sufficient for all Australian Apprentices. Engaging a regional organisation to provide these services should be considered.

Is the frequency of contact, as outlined, sufficient for those groups? Yes

Should there be set times for reassessment or should this only be undertaken when circumstances change which may make a person at risk?

MEA support Australian Apprentices being contacted on a minimum bi-annual basis to assess the need for support. We would also recommend an option for self identification.

Should employers be able to refer an Australian Apprentice to receive additional or intensive support, regardless of their assessment?

Yes. Employers are best placed to identify their Australian Apprentice requires assistance that they are not qualified to provide.

AAMS has the potential to identify those employers who have a high turnover of Australian Apprentices. Should this information be used to encourage those employers to seek additional face to face support? Yes.

Other comments

MEA is dedicated to ensuring the continued skilling of the energy industry and we strongly believe that Australian Apprenticeships are the key to easing the skilled shortages crippling our industry. While we support the proposed reforms to the Australian Apprenticeships system, we must stress the importance of a national system having capacity to provide targeted support for employers and their Australian Apprentices, specifically in the energy industry.

The Electrical Training Package is regarded as a more challenging pathway than other traditional trades due to its complexity and specific licensing requirements. As there are over 700 Apprenticeship or traineeship pathways, generic Apprenticeship support services struggle to provide the targeted assistance required by the energy industry. As indicated above, Apprenticeships that are serviced by MEA's ApprenticeConnect boast an 82% contract of training retention rate within the program. This compares to the industry standard of 66%. This data indicates that an industry targeted Apprenticeship support service is the most effective strategy to ensure both employer and Apprentice achieve their intended outcomes.

It is also important to consider the impact that the introduction of national licensing for electrical occupations will have on the Apprenticeship and training system. As licensing criteria and prerequisites inevitably change under the new national arrangements, current and potential Apprentices will need to be able to access the correct information on what they will need to do in order to become a licensed electrical worker or contractor. Given the number of occupations soon to be covered by national occupational licensing, it seems unlikely that a single body could provide the detailed advice required to all participants in the Australian Apprenticeships System. It again becomes apparent that the involvement of expert industry bodies is critical to any reforms made to the Australian Apprenticeship System.

Industry groups with expertise in their particular fields are an invaluable resource for Apprenticeship Support Services that must be utilised to ensure the much needed targeted support is available for the parties who rely on this system.