

Australia's International Education and Skills Strategic Framework Consultation

Submission by the National Electrical and Communications Association



June 2024



Executive Summary

The National Electrical and Communications Association appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework.

Our submission will be focussed on the needs of our sector in the energy, construction and communications sectors of our economy on behalf of our members who engage in this sector. More general submissions from the perspective of our associated Registered Training Organisation, Group training organisations will also guide the recommendations our Association wishes to bring to the Governments attention.

International education in Australia is a valuable asset that has delivered significant economic and social benefits for our community. It can address skills shortages currently being experienced not only in the electrotechnology and communications sectors but the construction industry more widely.

It is widely recognised that the Australian energy industry is suffering the most severe skills shortages of all industries. The National Council for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) forecasts electrical trades will be the number one skills shortage vocation over the coming decade, with no less than 35,000 additional electrical industry workers required by 2030. The long-term trend of declining trade training completion rates is exacerbating existing skill shortages across the Australian workforce. This review can explore opportunities to broaden the uptake and successful completion of apprenticeships and traineeships.

Aligning international education with the needs and specific requirements of the industries suffering skills shortages must not lose sight of ensuring integrity in the qualifications being offered by the sector.

As the peak industry body for Australia's electrical and communications industry, NECA provides the following submission on behalf of its members nationally.

About NECA

NECA is the peak body for Australia's electrical and communications industry, which employs close to 350,000 people and has an annual turnover of over \$80 billion.

NECA represent over 6,700 businesses across Australia, engaged in activities including the design, installation, and maintenance of electrotechnology equipment across a wide range of sectors including defence, construction, mining, air conditioning, refrigeration, manufacturing, communications, and renewable energy.

NECA also plays an integral role in developing the next generation of Australia's electrical and communications tradespeople, contractors, and subcontractors.

NECA represent the interests of electrical and communication businesses to all levels of government and in regulatory bodies, legislative arenas, and industry development forums.

Our members play a vital role in the national economy, facilitating business connections, powering homes, construction, and infrastructure.

Additionally, they encourage investment and enhance the security and reliability of Australia's energy network, which is critical to achieving affordable, environmentally sustainable outcomes.

NECA's national footprint

NECA's national presence, and close industry and governments collaboration perfectly positions the association as the leading national voice for the electrotechnology sector.

Through its associated GTOs and RTOs, NECA offers employment and training to apprentices and tradespeople nationwide.

Objective 1: A Sector Built on Quality and Integrity

Across Australia there are fewer than 50 Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) currently delivering the electrical sector's trade qualification (UEE30820) and fewer than 20 RTOs delivering the Electricity Supply sector's trade qualifications (UET30621 & UET30821).

Currently, fewer than 55% of electrical apprentices, outside the NECA network, complete their trade training, while NECA GTOs and RTOs maintain stable completion rates at around 90%. The broader industry's apprentice attrition rates could be stemmed through the implementation of strategies utilised by the Industry's GTOs including:

- Entry requirements.
- Apprentice mentoring and support.
- Employer advice and support.
- Quality Training Provision.

NECA would request that any recommendation should introduce measures that address the deficiencies in the regulatory oversight of Registered Training Organizations (RTOs) and ensure the quality and integrity of qualifications issued, particularly in the context of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

NECA would like to note that certain Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) operating within Australia have been charging exorbitant fees for vocational qualifications utilising recognised prior learning provisions, with some institutions requesting up to \$30,000 for a single qualification with the average cost being approximately \$15,000.

However, even the average fee of \$15,000 can be an exorbitant burden for individuals who have no chance of obtaining the required license due to their lack of experience or appropriate training. The actions of these for-profit RTO's while small in number, who prioritise profitability over ethical behaviour, raises concerns about financial exploitation and the affordability of quality education for aspiring learners and those vulnerable to such perceived quick fix schemes.

Such exorbitant fees can disproportionately impact individuals who are eager to enhance their skills and qualifications but lack the financial resources to afford such steep costs, especially when there is a lack of experience and renders the attainment of a license improbable. Equitable access to education should be at the forefront of education policy and these matters highlight the urgent need for regulatory intervention to prevent the

exploitation of our members and the wider community who are being taken advantage of by unscrupulous providers of VET.

We have also observed that many less than scrupulous or poorly resourced RTOs cater primarily to foreign students on student visas. These students are susceptible to misguided advice from immigration agents and lack adequate information from government sources.

Mistrust in government systems, stemming from their countries of origin, further compounds these challenges. The financial burden resulting from inadequate qualifications then falls upon the immigrant seeking better opportunities through education and employment.

Enhancing regulatory powers to address unscrupulous providers is highly commendable, supported and NECA recommends the Government avoid implementing multiple overlapping mechanisms. ASQA is the national regulator for VET and should be resourced fully to address genuine integrity and quality issues quickly and unimpeded.

Objective 2: A Managed System to Deliver Sustainable Growth Over

To ensure any vocational training in the electrotechnology sector is sustainable it must be of high quality and ensure compliance with state based regulatory frameworks. Therefore, there must be robust checks and balances on the providers credentials systems.

Any cap on courses should only be implemented after consulting with and receiving advice from the industry stakeholders which may include Employer Associations such as NECA or the recently formed Jobs Skills Councils whose remit is assist the Government and other stakeholders in decision-making regarding Australia's current, emerging, and future skills and workforce needs. Therefore, it is sensible for any decisions made by the Minister to consider the industry's advice, especially when proposing to limit providers ability to offer courses.