



Electrical Trades Union

AUSTRALIAN APPRENTICESHIP SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

DECEMBER, 2022

Meeting the workforce demands of the 21st century by giving our industry the tools to recruit, train, and retain electrical apprentices

ABOUT THE ETU

The Electrical Trades Union of Australia ('the ETU') is the principal union for electrical and electrotechnology tradespeople and apprentices in Australia, representing well over sixty-thousand workers around the country. The ETU is a part of the CEPU¹, which represents over one hundred thousand workers nationally, placing it amongst the largest trade unions in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the spirit of reconciliation, the ETU acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

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¹ Being the Communications, Electrical, Electronic, Energy, Information, Postal, Plumbing and Allied Services Union of Australia, a registered organisation under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009* (Cth).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Electrical workers are set to play the critical role in the delivery of the Federal Government's most significant policy commitments in the coming decade;

- The Powering Australia plan to bring down consumer energy prices
- Bringing online 82% renewables by 2030 in line with climate commitments
- Rewiring the Nation with 10,000kms of new transmission lines
- Delivering the electrification of homes, businesses, and transportation
- Building one million new homes under the National Housing Accord

Every single one of these commitments is jeopardised by major labour shortages in the sector, with tens of thousands of additional workers needed to meet the nation's future skills needs. The underlying issues that need to be addressed by policymakers in order to recruit enough apprentices to meet this challenge are:

- Poor pay and working conditions for apprentices make attracting and retaining apprentices difficult, especially in a tight labour market
- A VET system that isn't keeping up with the high-cost and rapidly evolving training needs of the sector
- **An Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) model that is failing to support apprentices adequately through to completion**
- Cultural issues within the industry that make it less attractive, especially to women.

Strong and supportive non-financial services and supports are critical to ensuring quality training outcomes and high retention rates, they can also boost recruitment and ensure apprentices are being directed towards projects that are in the national interest.

Our current network of AASN providers bring no substantive industry expertise and are failing to offer adequate mentorship and advice to apprentices in the electrical industry. There is a major lack of buy-in from employers and far too many apprentices are allowed to fall through the cracks and out of training.

RECOMMENDATION

The ETU is calling for the creation of an industry owned and led **Powering Australia Apprenticeship Support Network** to address these issues, providing apprentices with specialised support and advice from workers in their own industry and employers with greater confidence to invest in training more apprentices.

Current AASN Providers	Powering Australia Apprenticeship Support Network
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only provide mentorship to around 11% of electrical apprentices with most support offered remotely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer hands-on mentoring programs and in-person meetings, utilising existing networks, to every single electrical apprentice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer very little oversight to competency accreditation of apprentices or assistance to ensure quality training outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with employers and apprentices to actively monitor, review, and audit competency accreditations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> General support from companies that lack the technical knowledge and industry background to engage with specific workplace, training or safety questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staffed by workers with a strong industry background and technical knowledge to assist with the full spectrum of advice and support needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total lack of industry buy-in driving the current culture of freeloading apprenticeship training as it's seen as too hard and expensive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work directly with industry stakeholders to grow a culture of training apprentices that is sorely needed to meet our skills needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer very little assistance in recruiting new electrical apprentices, forcing TAFEs and RTOs to pick up the slack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand and better target recruitment activity, motivated by intricate knowledge of the industry's short and long term need for workers. Dedicate resources to supporting recruitment for projects covered by a broad scope Australian Skills Guarantee*
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One size fits all approach which fails to account for the specific challenges faced by underrepresented demographics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Would be able to target specific structural and cultural impediments to recruiting and retaining more women, first nations, CALD, and regional or remote apprentices

*The ETU is advocating for a more expansive Skills Guarantee that covers any project receiving Federal funding, finance, or assistance including through the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and National Reconstruction Fund

WHAT ISN'T WORKING CURRENTLY

Non-financial supports serve a critical purpose of nurturing apprentices through their training and helping to foster a connection to the industry, in turn ensuring quality training outcomes and higher retention rates both during and after apprenticeships. The persistent failure to match completion rates with industry demand over the preceding decades and ongoing failure to engage women in electrical trades would indicate that the current and historical network of support services is not fit for purpose and needs a serious overhaul to reverse the trajectory of the skills shortage currently facing electrical occupations.

A central pillar of these non-financial supports are Australian Apprenticeship Support Network (AASN) providers, contracted by the Federal Government to provide “personalised advice and support services from pre-commencement to completion”². These AASNs are funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, notionally, to provide tailored personal assistance to our trades of tomorrow but have largely failed to deliver a meaningful increase in apprenticeship completion rates, owing to a serious lack of occupational specificity and industry leadership within the AASN model.

A 2022 Essential Media survey³ found that half of electrical apprentices reported having received no support at any stage in their apprenticeship and only 11% of electrical apprentices reported having been provided with mentoring or advice on electives from their AASN provider. Critically, **two-thirds of electrical apprentices could not name their AASN**. To put it bluntly, if an apprentice can't name their mentor, it's because – in reality – they don't have a mentor.

The current low completion rates for apprentices and resulting skills shortages in our industry can be attributed in part to the **lack of comprehensive, wrap-around support offered to apprentices**: one in eight apprentices surveyed had considered quitting because of a lack of mentoring (noting such figures are skewed by a survivorship bias).

Separate to mentoring is the provision of support, particularly in connection with numeracy and literacy. Anecdotally, there is widespread scepticism in industry that the AASN providers are playing a useful role in connecting apprentices with these services. Rather, individual RTOs and State authorities have stepped in to provide these crucial services⁴.

Another basic issue holding back our industry from unlocking the workforce potential of underrepresented demographics like women is the failure to guarantee basic and necessary facilities to all workers on job sites. A 2022 ETU Amenities Survey⁵ identified that one in three workers did not have access to gendered bathrooms at work and nearly one in five didn't even have on-site toilets. Blue-collar industries will continue to suffer the labour market constraints associated with only utilising the male half of the workforce unless there

² Department of Employment and Workplace Relations 2022, “*Australian Apprenticeships – What is the Australian Apprenticeship Support Network?*”,

³ Essential Media 2022, ETU Apprentices Survey (Final Report)

⁴ See, for instance, the Apprenticeship Support Officer program run by Apprenticeships Victoria

⁵ ETU Australia 2022, ETU National Amenities Survey Results

is a serious effort to improve women's workplace conditions. Such an effort is difficult to imagine being spearheaded by the current offering of AASN providers with no industry specialisation and a demonstrably poor track record for engagement and personalised support.

Similarly, industry participants are unaware of any material efforts by AASN providers to expand the recruitment of electrical apprentices. Again, these efforts are instead led by other players, most notably TAFEs and industry RTOs. This recruitment role is vital as it is how the persistent underrepresentation of women, First Nations, and culturally and linguistically diverse workers will be addressed. But again, the disconnect between AASN and industry mean that this need goes unmet.

It is the position of the ETU that addressing these issues is only possible through a major overhaul of Australia's apprenticeship supports to drive **greater buy-in and ongoing involvement from industry stakeholders** and in turn deliver **more effective personalised support for apprentices**.

Such poor results are unsurprising. At the core of the AASN model is a one size fits all approach, with contracts awarded based to on geography and no regard being given to industry or occupational specialisation. Employers have no ability to "buy in" and no attempt is made to garner industry-level support. Engagement with apprentices is conducted on a largely desktop or, at most, telephone basis – notwithstanding that the very cohort that AASNs are supposed to service have been identified as needing support with Foundation Skills.

In short, why would an apprentice struggling at work and at training with increasing social dislocation even think to contact their AASN? The data makes plain that they don't, **the real question is why any other result was expected**. The failure of the AASN model is not due to a lack of funding nor necessarily the bad faith of the providers: rather it is driven by an entrenched disconnect between the AASN providers and industry.

WHAT'S WORKED IN THE PAST:

In considering options to improve apprenticeship outcomes in the energy sector, Government should look to previous successful policy programs. One such case study was the highly successful Energy Industry Apprenticeship Progression Management System Pilot outlined below.

In July 2010 the Australian Government commissioned an Expert Panel to report on Australian Apprenticeships and to provide advice on options for reform of the Australian Apprenticeship system. In February 2011 the Expert Panel, McDowell et al. (2011) released their report: A Shared responsibility – Apprenticeships for the 21st Century. Following release of the report, the Australian Government called for submissions on the report.

In response to the report and the submissions they subsequently received, the Government instituted several policy programmes as part of the Australian Government Skills Connect

initiative, these included the Australian Apprenticeships Mentoring Programme, the Australian Apprenticeships Advisers Programme and the Accelerated Australian Apprenticeships Programme. Commonwealth and State and Territory skills ministers held a meeting on 25 November 2011 where principles for harmonisation were agreed which these programs were supported by.

A key focus of these reviews, reports and submissions was the poor rate of apprenticeship completions; that is workers who commenced an apprenticeship but did not complete all the training or successfully graduate as a tradesperson. This represented a major policy problem for government, employers and the workers themselves who all invested significant time and money, including public funding, into what turned out to be an unsuccessful outcome.

Concurrent to the above events, the then Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education began discussions with the Australian electrotechnology industry, seeking to engage with the electrical trades to develop and trial a competency-based progression model for the electrician apprenticeship due to the particularly high rates of non-completion for electrical apprenticeships.

In response, the Industry Skills Council, E-Oz Energy Skills Australia, on behalf of the electrotechnology industry developed the specifications for a project to pilot informed by detailed modelling, research, and stakeholder consultations. The pilot model and subsequent funding applications were for what would become the Energy Industry Apprentice Progression Management System (EIAPMS) policy program. The model and application were supported both in principle, and subsequently in implementation by the three relevant industry peak bodies; the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the National Electrical and Communications Association (NECA) and the Master Electricians Australia (MEA).

The application was successful and E-Oz entered into a Funding Agreement with the Commonwealth on the 15th of June, 2012 to deliver the EIAPMS policy program through an associative governance model of service delivery. In accordance with the funding agreement, a comprehensive suite of systems and structures were subsequently developed and implemented, including:

- An automated 'Readiness Assessment' and associated support materials for new apprentices – a tool which is now used throughout the electrical industry
- A package of industry advisory services for employers, schools and workers
- A quality assurance model for apprentice progression with integrated national benchmarks
- A package of professional development training products for teachers, employers and apprentice mentors
- A comprehensive Apprentice Mentoring system
- Support for the delivery of the Certificate III Electrician qualification through a suite of quality blended learning and training and assessment resources
- A fit for purpose, fully integrated system for data management

At the time of commencement of this program electrician apprenticeship completion rates had fallen to just 62% of commencements. The policy program was delivered through a partnership between each of the key electrotechnology industry bodies, led by their industry training association, E-OZ, which worked closely with each of the parties along with each of the relevant government departments and agencies.

Following the implementation of the EIAMPS policy program, and despite the final review of the program, E-Oz (2015), finding broad industry support and electrician apprentice completion rates rising from 62% to 92% the program was not renewed by the Abbot Government in 2014.

THE PROBLEM IN CONTEXT

The Energy Transition is in full swing with renewable energy making up one third of electricity generation, rising to 82% by 2030, and EV and PHEV sales increasing by well over 100% year after year. Skill shortages are rife across critical trades and occupations, jeopardising Australia's ability to reach its climate target and inflating power bills for households and workplaces.

The Government's bold Powering Australia plan seeks to rise to the challenge of a changing climate but is put at risk by chronic skills shortages. We need a jobs plan that maximises the benefits for all Australians and provides opportunities for the tens of thousands of additional workers needed to address our long-term skills needs. But these workers are not going to materialise without good pay, safe working conditions, fair treatment at work, and, critically, **proper support and mentoring** to see them through the training process.

Powering Australia's job plan needs to deal with the challenges of a VET system in crisis and generally declining apprentice completion rates.

TAFE is and needs to remain the centre of Vocational education in Australia. However, TAFE is struggling to meet the needs of the rapidly evolving Energy sector. It is unlikely that TAFEs will be in a position in the short and medium term to train the number of apprentices that the sector needs. In these situations, the best option for the government is the funding of Industry led RTOs that are tailored to match the training needs of their region.

A NEW AASN MODEL

Delivering the workforce requires a plan that includes a dedicated Powering Australia Apprenticeship Support Network. As previously outlined, our current AASN model plainly isn't up to the task of properly supporting the tens of thousands of highly specialised electrical apprentices needed to staff the energy transition we are set to undergo in the coming decades. Unspecialised AASN providers operating across all industries and sectors break the link between apprentice and mentor before it can even begin. This, combined with an absence of industry involvement in facilitating and complementing AASN providers, means that far too many apprentices are allowed to fall through the cracks and out of training.

In consultation with members undertaking electrical apprenticeships on their support needs (something we have found little evidence is being done by those being funded by the Government to actually support them), the ETU identified a strong desire for a greater presence from external mentors who could offer them advice and support. Apprentices requested that:

- Any future reforms create a system whereby AASN providers supply field officers to carry out regular in-person visits to their workplaces over the course of their apprenticeship
- These officers come from the same trade, if not the same industry specialisation, and are kept attached to the same apprentices for the course of their training where possible,
- Officers are bound to an annual minimum number of site-visits and are kept to manageable apprentice-to-field officer ratios.

The apprentices viewed the above as effective ways of ensuring that they feel supported, receive the advice they need, and are given the tools they need to complete their training and go on to long and fruitful careers.

A dedicated Powering Australia Apprenticeship Support Network, owned and led by industry, will drive up completion rates by delivered tailored, industry-specific support with a dedicated focus on the specific needs of apprentices in the energy sector. Bringing key stakeholders together to form an industry led AASN will also better enable the provision of structured fallback options should apprentices need to change employer or training focus.

Creating an industry-led Australian Apprenticeship Support Network provider for the electrical industry would:

1. Create the necessary link between the apprentice and support network
2. Facilitate the delivery of successful mentoring programs with a proven track record of driving up completion rates.
3. Ensure apprentices are provided credible advice with regards to elective choices and workplace or safety questions.

4. Foster greater trust and buy-in from both employers and apprentices
5. Dedicated funding of RTO's including industry lead Skills Centres
6. Attract and retain apprentices and trainees especially Women, First Nations, and people from CALD backgrounds

CONCLUSION

Australia needs to rethink how it supports and manages apprenticeships if we are to meet our major commitments around reducing emissions, reducing household energy costs, and addressing housing affordability. The current model lacks industry buy-in, imposing a one-size-fits-no one approach to supporting apprentices that has failed to address low completion rates and the underrepresentation of women in electrical trades.

An industry owned and led Powering Australia Apprenticeship Support Network would bring employers, industry bodies, and the ETU together to ensure that every single electrical apprentice is given the support needed to complete their training and kickstart a well-paid, secure career building Australia's future. Our model is informed by the recommendations of real apprentices, tradespeople, and employers who know that the current system isn't meeting their needs and will be able to respond quickly to the changing needs of the sector as we navigate a renewable energy revolution.

APPENDIX A – Discussion Paper Focus Questions

Stage of lifecycle	Focus Questions	ETU Response
Pre-Apprenticeships	How could services better support the match between apprentices and employers?	Provide pre-apprentices with training and a thorough interview process with someone experienced in the same trade they are applying for, preparing them for future interviews and the workplace.
	In a tight labour market, is a pre apprenticeship attractive to potential apprentices?	Yes in electrical trades.
	How can parents and schools access advice on apprenticeship pathways to support career decisions?	Through in-school Pathways to Employment Program coaching and advice on accessing apprenticeships. Involve workers in in-school programs. Educate parents and the community that jobs don't have a gender.
Pre-Commencement Career Advice	How can we better sell apprenticeships in priority industries and occupations?	Cutting edge online strategy with “always-in” advertising Ensure that students have an opportunity to meet real workers at career expos and events. Funding for programs that go to schools to talk to students about careers in trades. Engage school-aged students with fun hands-on experiences, like using training panels in classrooms, to break down cultural norms and give exposure to electrical work. Partner with other industry stakeholder to develop material to counter cultural stereotypes around trades careers.
Sign-Up	How can the sign-up process ensure the employer and apprentice feel supported, understand their responsibilities, understand the frequency and form of AASN contact to expect and know where to go for help?	By leveraging existing industry networks, the AASN should schedule visits to the apprentice in advance. 1 st and 2 nd year apprentices should receive no less than 4 face-to-face visits per year. Minimum of two in-person visits each year after. This could be supplemented by phone and email contact where required.

Year 1

What do apprentices and employers most value in the sign-up process? Are there alternative approaches?	<p>Someone familiar with the system navigating the paperwork and compliance requirements.</p> <p>An alternative approach is to provide access to someone with industry specific experience and familiar with the VET system who can advise on elective subjects and assist in navigating the compliance requirements and paperwork</p>
How could employers be supported with their supervisory role of an apprentice?	Employers could be supported with their supervision of an apprentice through having an experienced AASN representative take on a mentoring and advisory role for their apprentices. The AASN representative must have specific industry experience for the apprentices they are working with.
How should advice on available supports and services to apprentices and employers be delivered?	<p>Variety of mediums such as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dedicated and engaging online ecosystem incorporating:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apprenticeship Support Mobile App• Social media• YouTube• Comprehensive Welcome Pack on commencement of apprenticeship• Text and Email contact• In-person meetings with AASN officers• Strong interaction with industry to drive workplace referrals• Disaggregated network of industry representatives, similar to the “connector” model of Mates In Construction

*Off-the-job
training*

*Continued
Training*

How should extra supports such as mentoring, study assistance, mediation, career advice be promoted?	Mentoring should be considered a primary support, not an extra. Consistent mentoring with the same person as far as possible is essential and should be promoted through direct contact and communication. Supports should be promoted in a way that is inclusive and easily accessible to all apprentices and stakeholders at an early stage before crisis.
How can we make it easier to communicate regularly with apprentices in the first 12 months?	Face to Face visits to build a mentoring relationship. Minimum of four in the 1 st year. Partnering with RTOs to leverage existing industry fora and events
Is there sufficient flexibility to support apprentices with pre-existing skills and those who are excelling to progress faster through their apprenticeship?	Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) exists to recognise existing relevant training and skills.
What would assist regional apprentices experiencing difficulty in accessing their off the job training?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suitable safe accommodation for those who travel from remote areas • Providing for family and support networks to attend when traveling in from remote areas. • Ensuring they have contact with AASN providers when attending blocks of trade school. • Ensuring the employers can't interfere with attendance at trade school blocks.
Is the value of releasing the apprentice for off the job training clear enough to the employer?	In the Electrotechnology industry employers must be a licenced Electrician and Licenced Electrical Contractor. They generally understand the importance of off the job training as they have done it themselves.
Are targeted supports later in training effective enough for employers and apprentices to have an impact?	Supports should be structured through the apprenticeship and communicated by a mentor who has specific industry experience.
How can we better identify apprentices, particularly at-risk cohorts who need additional support?	Utilising a readiness assessment pre or at the commencement of an apprenticeship. AASN mentor needs to have direct contact with the Training Organisation educators.

<i>Years 3 & 4</i>	Some employers disengage from taking on apprentices at all due to the high movement during the 'payoff period' at this stage. Is this something the Government should address?	Yes, through a broad scope Australian Skills Guarantee which requires projects receiving Government funding, finance, or assistance to train apprentices. When most employers are required to train their own apprentices there are few who need to steal other's. AASNs need to work with projects covered by the ASG to facilitate recruitment needs.
	Record employment levels and skills shortages are causing more cancellations later in the apprenticeship. What would encourage apprentices to complete their apprenticeship in this environment?	Financial support for low paid apprentices Highlighting the employment opportunities available when completed.
<i>Changing an Apprenticeship</i>	Are displacement registers useful and are there additional supports required?	A register run by an industry specific AASN would benefit apprentices who are displaced.
	What services would assist apprentices looking to change employers and/or qualifications?	Support from an industry specific AASN Mentor who understands the VET system
	Are there specific culturally safe supports that would help more First Nations apprentices complete their training?	Promoting involvement and support from family and community networks through the course of apprenticeships for First Nations apprentices
<i>First Nations People</i>	What would assist regional and remote First Nations apprentices throughout their apprenticeship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suitable safe accommodation for those who travel from remote areas • Providing for family and support networks to attend when traveling in from remote areas. • Ensuring they have contact with AASN mentors when attending blocks of trade school.
<i>Women in Apprenticeships</i>	What would improve workplace culture to ensure women in trade apprenticeships can succeed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved amenity access • Guarantee the provision of correctly fitting Personal Protective Equipment, • Improving workplace culture • Empowering men to call out unacceptable behaviour

*Australian
School Based
Apprenticeships*

What advice do key influencers need to support women to consider a career in trade occupations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving Workplace culture • Improving amenity access on sites.
How do we better retain women in trade occupations?	<p>Support from an industry specific AASN Mentor who understands the VET system</p> <p>Mentoring from other trades women who are already in the industry</p>
What additional support should be provided to trade apprentices continuing their apprenticeship post-school?	Support from an industry specific AASN Mentor who understands the VET system
Should supports offered to school based apprentices and employers of school-based apprentices be different to those post school?	Younger workers would benefit from LifeSkills training being part of the supports system.