

31 May 2023

Submission: Draft Skills Occupation List

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.

ETU members make up a critical pillar of the licensed electrical workforce responsible for delivering the Australian Government's commitments on providing a more efficient, affordable, and secure emissions-free energy network. The ETU welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation.

The electrical trades have been in shortage since at least 1981,¹ and the occupation has been identified as one experiencing skill shortages on the Skills Priority List (SPL) for the last three years.² The current shortage in the electrical trades is only predicted to get worse, with Jobs and Skills Australia predicting that Australia will face a shortfall of 32,000 electricians by 2030 to meet the government's "rewiring the nation" policy settings, and a shortfall of 42,500 to meet the more ambitious policy settings announced under the government's Future Made in Australia and Renewable Energy Superpower scenarios.³

If temporary migration was an effective strategy to address this ongoing and critical shortage, it would have done so by now.

As the ETU has noted in several recent submissions, this skills shortage could only have been addressed by decisions and actions taken years ago – to invest in training centres through increased capital and operational funding, at the scale required to address the shortage, and to ensure that the private and public sector took a concerted and sustained effort to employ apprentices and train the workforce of the future.

The ETU has produced an 8-point plan to address skills shortages across the electrical trades.⁴ This specifies the role that skilled migration could play, as part of a comprehensive plan alongside necessary increases in investment in training capacity and the use of government procurement levers that would require the substantial employment of apprentices at all stages of training in all government financed projects.

The ETU has proposed an industry-based approach to migration that includes pathways to permanency for migrant workers and greater employer investment in training the domestic workforce, while at the same time addressing the drivers of exploitation of migrant workers.

¹ See, Electrical Trades Union, 'Capacity Investment Scheme' (Implementation Design Paper, May 2024)

<https://www.etunational.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CIS-Design-Paper.pdf>.

² Jobs and Skills Australia, Australian Government, 'Skills Priority List September 2023 – Historical' (Spreadsheet, 2023)

<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Skills%20Priority%20List%20-%20September%202023%20-%20Historical.xlsx>.

³ Jobs and Skills Australia, Australian Government, *The Clean Energy Generation – Supplementary Modelling Report* (Report, 3 October 2023) <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/download/19313/clean-energy-generation/2384/supplementary-report/pdf>.

⁴ <https://www.etunational.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/8-Point-Energy-Plan-single-page-final-edit-0.pdf>

The ETU commends the Australian Government's work in developing the Aged Care Industry Labour Agreement that lays out a comprehensive and sensible path to skilled migration in this critical industry. We propose a similar agreement for the electrical trades.

The Electrical Industry Labour Agreement (ELIA) must:

1. Ensure that migrant workers are employed on the same conditions as the domestic workforce.
2. Provide for strategies to develop domestic workforce capacity through investment in skills and training by establishing union collective agreement terms which provide for:
 - a. minimum apprentice ratios of not less than 1 apprentice: 5 tradespersons,
 - b. initiatives to engage women, First Nations and other underrepresented cohorts on projects,
 - c. genuine transfer of knowledge to the domestic workforce; and
 - d. application of a robust offshore and onshore technical skills assessment pathway for any overseas workers engaged on projects
3. Involve the union in all stages of onboarding migrant workers from the skills assessment and verification processes through to on job access, to remove all forms of worker exploitation.
4. Provide for pathways to permanency after two years for migrant workers engaged on projects.

The current model of identifying and addressing skills shortages through the skills occupation list is not fit for purpose: it does not address the structural drivers that have led to an occupation being in shortage, and it leaves migrant workers exposed to exploitation through a reliance on their employer to remain in the country. The ETU's ELIA proposal addresses these issues, and we recommend to government that it looks reform how it approaches skills shortages through migration by adopting an industry-led approach such as the one proposed here.

Kind regards,

