



Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia

December 2025

Submission by the Electrical Trades Union of
Australia (ETU)



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 First Nations peoples today.

Inquiry into the Value of Skilled Migration in Australia

The ETU welcomes the opportunity to participate in this consultation.

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 is a member of the Ministerial Advisory Council on Skilled Migration and is actively involved in the developing and maintaining pathways for overseas skills recognition that ensure the safety of workers, consumers and the rigour of our trades.

Drawing on this experience, and the feedback of our members, our submission focuses on the following terms of reference, with specific reference to existing skills shortages in the electrical trades.

- c) The scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities.
- d) The scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support Australian businesses, boost productivity and encourage innovation.

The ETU has never opposed skilled migration, subject to three core principles: it must not be used to undercut wages, it must not be used to suppress training opportunities, and it must be free of visa exploitation.

In this submission, we make recommendations regarding necessary reforms to the skilled migration settings to ensure that it more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors – including the training and development of local workforces – and that they don't contribute to the exploitation of migrant workers.

Recommendations

Recommendation: Work with unions and industry to implement an Electrical Industry Labour Agreement (ELIA) to protect migrant workers from exploitation and provide strategies to develop the domestic workforce capacity.

Recommendation: Reinstate a program for OTSA pathways to alleviate some of the significant costs associated with OTSA. If carefully co-designed with industry, not only could the existing systems be streamlined for electricians and air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanics, but the system could be expanded to include clear pathways for other energy sector trade qualifications.

Recommendation: Invest in streamlining skills assessment for potential migrants from countries with comparable qualifications who want to work in Australia's clean energy industry in skilled electrical trades occupations.



Background: Electrical trades in shortage

The electrical trades have been in “temporary” shortage since at least 1981,¹ and the occupation has been identified as one experiencing skill shortages on the Skills Priority List (SPL) since 2020.² 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 42,500 electricians by 2030 to meet the government’s policy settings announced under the Future Made in Australia and Renewable Energy Superpower scenarios.³

This projected and growing shortage of electrical workers is not unique to Australia. With the majority of countries around the world seeking to decarbonise, the IEA finds that there is a growing shortage of skilled workers in energy trades globally.⁴

In the light of this global context, it is clear that any skilled migration program must be accompanied by investments in the training of local workforces, to ensure that it isn’t further contributing to domestic and global workforce shortages.

Proposal: Industry Labour Agreements

As the ETU has noted in several 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.⁵ 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, whilst at the same time addressing the drivers of exploitation of migrant workers.

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

¹ 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 IEA (2024), *World Energy Employment*, <https://iea.blob.core.windows.net/assets/d2b4b054-4a55-4c6f-893f-fc2c8b77e9a1/WorldEnergyEmployment2024.pdf>

⁵ ETU, ‘Powering Australia Plan’, <https://www.etunational.asn.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/8-Point-Energy-Plan-single-page-final-edit-0.pdf>



workforce.

2. Provide strategies to develop the domestic workforce capacity through investment in skills and training by establishing union collective agreement terms which includes:
 - 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. a 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 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 EILA proposal addresses these issues, and we recommend to the government that it looks to reform how it approaches skills shortages through migration by adopting an industry-led approach such as the one proposed here.

Recommendation: Work with unions and industry to implement an Electrical Industry Labour Agreement (ELIA) to protect migrant workers from exploitation and provide strategies to develop the domestic workforce capacity.

Maintaining the quality of the trade: trades recognition pathways

While the knowledge and skills of many overseas workers is very high, there are differences in the manner in which this technical expertise needs to be applied, a difference that represents a critical skills gap. Electrical regulators are especially concerned that this gap be addressed in regulated trade vocations such as electrical, refrigeration and air conditioning, electrical linework and cable jointing, where the work context may differ markedly in overseas countries and where such differences could endanger lives, infrastructure or systems.

The pathway for skilled migrants with equivalent or similar qualifications as those required in Australia is via a skills assessment with a Trades Recognition Australia approved Registered Training Organisation. If successful, an applicant will receive an Offshore Technical Skills Record and can then apply with the relevant state or territory licensing authority for a provisional license, registration or certificate. The candidate will be permitted to work under supervision whilst completing Australian context gap training.

A key gap in the system is the lack of established processes for energy qualifications outside the electrician and air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanic qualification. Further aggravating the challenge was the decision in 2019 by the Morrison Government to abolish the Trades Recognition Services (TRS) program which provided a pathway for migrant workers already in Australia to have their skills assessed and verified onshore. The abolition of TRS has resulted in an increase in migrant workers being targeted by unscrupulous training providers promising quick skills verification processes that ultimately do not lead to a licensed outcome leaving the migrant worker both out of pocket and unable to work in their profession.

Currently skills recognition for overseas workers in the Electricity Supply Industry is disjointed and fragmented as there is no national industry endorsed skilled migration program, process or pathway.



Unlike the Electrician and Air-conditioning Mechanics qualifications, the Certificate III level Transmission Overhead qualification has no Trades Recognition Australia approved pathway, leaving overseas trained workers with no clear pathway for their skills to be assessed and verified or to secure the appropriate Australian Context Gap Training necessary to achieve an Australian qualification or electrical licence.

In addition, transmission projects need a supply of a highly skilled Certificate II level Overhead Transmission workforce to assist in the construction and erection of transmission towers. Equally there is no formally agreed pathway for these workers to have their skills assessed and verified or to secure the appropriate Australian Context Gap Training necessary to achieve an Australian qualification.

In other words, there is no clear pathway for a Line Worker Certificate II or Certificate III which are recognised as a skills shortage and a qualification required to build the 10,000 km of transmission infrastructure in Australia's move to renewable energy. The transmission lines required are essential in the connectivity of renewable energy generation and a key component in Australia's New Energy Future. Certificate II qualified line workers are required to erect transmission towers and string transmission lines.

Recommendation: the Federal Government reinstate a program for OTSA pathways to alleviate some of the significant costs associated with OTSA. If carefully co-designed with industry, not only could the existing systems be streamlined for electricians and air-conditioning and refrigeration mechanics, but the system could be expanded to include clear pathways for other energy sector trade qualifications.

Recommendation: the Federal Government invest in streamlining skills assessment for potential migrants from countries with comparable qualifications who want to work in Australia's clean energy industry in skilled electrical trades occupations.