



SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

SKILLING AUSTRALIA FOR THE FUTURE DISCUSSION PAPER

Introduction

The Australian Trucking Association is the peak national body that unites and represents the interests of the Australian trucking industry.

The ATA's members consist of the state and sector based trucking associations, the Transport Workers' Union and a number of Australia's largest transport companies. This submission was prepared with the guidance of the ATA's Skills and Workforce Committee.

Skill shortages in the Australian trucking industry

The trucking industry faces an extreme shortage of truck drivers over the next five years. One estimate is that the trucking industry will need an additional 10,000 drivers by 2012 as it responds to Australia's rapidly growing freight task.

The industry's greatest unmet demand is for heavy combination (semi-trailer) and multi-combination (B-double, B-triple and road train) drivers. The unmet demand for rigid truck drivers is not as high, which has important policy implications. These are discussed below.

A whole-of-government advisory role for Skills Australia

The ATA considers the Government should position Skills Australia as an adviser to the whole of the government, not just the Education, Employment and Workplace Relations portfolio.

In our view, the Skills Australia/Industry Skills Council process will generate the best intelligence possible about the future skill needs of Australia's industries, but that intelligence will be worthless if government departments are able to ignore it or substitute their own ideas.

For example, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship recently convened a working group on the use of subclass 457 visas in the trucking industry. The working group took it upon itself to issue a finding that said:

Slight growth was expected for the occupation of truck driver over the next five years. Unemployment is average, vacancy rates are average and most new vacancies arise from people changing jobs or leaving the industry. Four per cent of vacancies represent new jobs being created.

The finding was completely inconsistent with the industry's experience, numerous research reports and the work done by the Transport and Logistics Industry Skills Council (TLISC).

In the future, departments like DIC should be required to draw on the expert views of Skills Australia, rather than substituting their own idiosyncratic views about workforce shortages.

Moving from surveys to action

The ATA urges the Government to ensure that Skills Australia does not begin its work by commissioning even more research into Australia's skill shortage. There has been endless research carried out with respect to the trucking industry already, including a recent survey by DEEWR that is yet to be released. DEEWR is now carrying out another survey of the broader logistics sector in conjunction with the Australian Logistics Council.

All of the research confirms there is an extreme shortage of truck drivers. We now need action to address the skill shortage, not more research into whether it exists.

Ensuring that state based industry advisory bodies are engaged in the model

Expanding the role of the Industry Skills Councils has the potential to duplicate the work of the state-based skills advisory bodies. For example, TDT Victoria currently provides transport industry employers with training needs analyses, training plans, internal training audits, and advice on selecting registered training providers.

In the ATA's view, it will be essential for the ISCs to reach clear understandings with their state based counterparts about their respective roles. The Australian Government could require the ISCs to record those understandings in writing to ensure there are no misunderstandings or areas of inadvertent duplication.

Focusing on new entrants to the industry

One of the ATA's member organisations, the Transport Workers Union, has pointed out that 80-90 per cent of all training conducted in road transport is of existing workers who are already qualified and licensed to drive heavy vehicles.

In the ATA's view, heavy vehicle driver training under the Productivity Places Program should therefore focus on:

- new entrants to the trucking industry; and
- existing heavy vehicle drivers who need to upgrade their qualifications to operate heavy combination or multi-combination vehicles.

Improving the graduated licensing system

The heavy vehicle driver training under the Productivity Places Program is intended to result in jobseekers holding one of the following current VET qualifications:

TLI20207	Certificate II in Transport and Logistics (Road Transport)
TLI30207	Certificate III in Transport and Logistics (Road Transport)

The Certificate II is focused on light and medium rigid trucks; the Certificate III is focused on heavy rigid trucks and heavy combination vehicles (semi-trailers).

These certificates do not, of themselves, qualify drivers to work in the industry. Drivers must hold the relevant heavy vehicle licence from their state or territory licensing authority, although some RTOs are accredited to test their students and issue them with licenses along with their course certificates.

Heavy vehicle licences are graduated: a driver applying for heavy rigid licence must have held a car licence for two years. The driver must then hold the rigid licence for 12 months before being eligible for a heavy combination licence and must wait another 12 months before applying for a multi-combination licence.

Alternatively, a heavy rigid driver can apply directly for a multi-combination licence after 12 months, but must pass a heavy combination licence assessment before undertaking multi-combination training.

As a result of the interaction between the VET system and graduated licensing:

- job seekers who want to take up one of the many vacancies for heavy combination and multi-combination drivers are required to seek work driving a rigid truck for their first twelve months in the industry. There are fewer vacancies for rigid truck drivers. As a result, some job seekers give up and do not ever work in the part of the industry with the greatest skill shortage.
- job seekers who are eligible to receive subsidised funding for their initial training may be deterred from joining the industry because of the cost of upgrading their qualifications later to drive heavy combination and multi-combination vehicles.
- job seekers who obtain their initial licence and then move interstate cannot upgrade their qualifications without returning to their original jurisdiction, because the states and territories do not recognise each other's licence testing.

The graduated licensing system can be made to work better, and the ATA urges the Government to form a working party with the state and territory licensing authorities to establish stronger links between the VET competency qualifications and licensing system.

Raising the profile of the trucking industry and making it a better place to work

The ATA believes the trucking industry needs to take action to raise the industry's profile and to make it a better place to work; otherwise, the extra training places will go unfilled.

In May, the ATA will be launching its new Mobile Education Centre, a state-of-the-art semi-trailer filled with interactive displays about careers in the industry and road safety. The semi-trailer will tour schools, field days and shows across the country.

The ATA will host a safety summit at the 2008 Australian Trucking Convention to discuss how the industry can take action to improve its safety culture.

We have also urged the Australian, state and territory transport ministers to:

- introduce significant regulatory incentives, including financial incentives, to encourage trucking operators to join audited safety accreditation schemes like TruckSafe;

- encourage operators and other participants in the supply chain to sign up to codes of conduct, such as the Retail Logistics Supply Chain Code of Conduct;
- develop and mandate the adoption of customer service charters for on-road enforcement officers, including mechanisms for reporting and pursuing breaches, to ensure drivers are treated as fellow professionals of the road;
- fund the construction and upgrade of heavy vehicle rest areas across Australia's road system and in urban areas; and
- pursue strong measures to improve road safety, including uniform fatigue laws and better speed management.

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30 April, 2008