



Australian Radio Communications Industry Association  
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Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash  
Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT

Dear Minister,

I write to you on behalf of the Australian Radio Communications Industry Association (ARCIA), recognised by the Australian Communications & Media Authority (ACMA) as the peak industry body representing the radio communications industry. Our members encompass equipment suppliers, maintenance and support industries as well as accessory suppliers that support wireless communications users across Australia.

Some important facts –

- ) The spectrum utilised by the radio communications industry in Australia generates up to \$3.9 billion dollars per annum
- ) It is estimated that around 1500 people are employed by our members across all regions of Australia
- ) Over the past ten years virtually all of the TAFE colleges around Australia have ceased to offer radio trades skills training to apprentices
- ) Our members remain keen to employ young people, but the system is not providing the technical training that this industry needs.
- ) Although on the surface the RTO sector appear to offer appropriate training content, when examined closely it does not meet key industry requirements and so is deemed not 'fit for purpose'.
- ) Australia's public safety agencies rely heavily on the radio communications industry for ongoing support of their 'mission critical' communications infrastructure

Although a smaller industry sector, the services we supply to broader industry and government across all sectors are of critical importance - in 2014 our association commissioned an economic enquiry into the value of the spectrum utilised by the Land Mobile Radio (LMR) industry in Australia, with the findings showing the value as being as high as \$3.9 billion per annum. Our industry has a high degree of importance when you consider that ***'no plane takes off, no ship sets sail, no train leaves the station and our emergency services cannot function without operating radio communications'***.

One thing made starkly clear during the current crisis is the continued - and growing - importance of communications technology to everyday life – whether it's remote working, telehealth, public safety, emergency response, contact tracing or keeping in touch with family and community, Australia's economy and society depend increasingly on modern information and communications systems.



As they grow in complexity and scale, these systems increasingly rely on wireless connections – placing increasing pressure on the dwindling number of specialists who have the technical skills and knowledge to keep complex wireless and radio networks operating reliably. To ensure Australia's continuing productivity and security, there is an urgent need to grow this workforce, and to ensure existing participants keep their skills current - the previous approaches of relying on importation of skilled personnel or leaving training to large Telco's or utilities have proven no longer valid

Accordingly, ARCIA welcomes the announcement of Federal Government's **JobTrainer** initiative, which will assist with funding a large increase in the number of apprentice and trainee places. However in the case of the radio and wireless communications sector, this alone is not sufficient – in many areas of Australia, RTOs are presently not able to deliver relevant training courses. This situation exists despite significant work by ARCIA as the peak industry body. Additional focus is needed to ensure relevant training is available to those who need it and preferably not based purely on the state by state delivery as at present.

Although the Tertiary Education sector provides excellent training opportunities for Communications Engineering, there is basically no training available at the technician level, and it is the technicians who do all of the installation and ongoing support after engineers have designed communications networks. Under the present systems, the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system is supposed to be providing the skills training required by technicians. However, over the past ten years we have seen a steady decline in the number of TAFE institutions offering the courses needed by our industry, due to a limitation in government funding.

As a niche industry we find that we struggle to provide enough technician and apprentice trainees to meet the relevant class sizes imposed by the various State institutions, although on a national basis we could provide the numbers. The drawback is that the additional costs involved for trainees to travel outside their state to attend an institution offering an appropriate course is significant, both in the increased costs from the relevant state TAFE and also with the costs of travel and accommodation, this presents the employers of apprentices or trainees with a punitive cost burden to provide the training.

In making this approach we are seeking support at several levels:

- ) There needs to be adequate funding to the TAFE sector to ensure that at least some institutions are providing the specific courses needed by our industry.
- ) We would like to see the Government further subsidise the costs of apprenticeship training for new entrants to the industry – in the form of assistance for both course fees and travel and accommodation costs for attendance at training blocks. To overcome the present problem of small class sizes, this could be structured to direct all apprentices to one or two selected TAFE institutions in separate states of Australia. This approach would ensure the cost for attendees is the same, regardless of where they are located. This cohort need the benefits of hands-on training to gain essential foundation skills and knowledge.
- ) The recent COVID-19 situation has demonstrated the viability of remote learning as the lockdown situation forced the temporary abandonment of most traditional forms of face-to-face learning in all tiers of the education system. We would believe remote learning is a viable approach for continuation training or gap training, for those currently employed in industry who need to further develop their skills. Funding is needed to identify appropriate TAFE institutions who can deliver remote learning, and assist them to develop and adapt relevant course content for online delivery and assessment. This could include travel by students and/or assessors to directly observe and verify learners' competence in the workplace setting where required.



We would further draw your attention to the fact that many of the organisations who are our members meet the Government classification of Small to Medium Enterprises, and many are in fact family owned business, or have grown from that form initially. There are many of our members who also operate in regional areas and contribute to their local economies and it is essential that they can identify and train new technicians and apprentices to maintain their business viability and continue to provide local employment.

Our Association undertakes Professional Development training sessions to try and fill the void left by a lack of suitable TAFE based training and to continue the training of industry personnel with the support of our industry vendors and suppliers also continue to support ongoing industry training. This is an area where a Commonwealth grant to fund further training options would be of short term assistance to our industry.

As valuable as industry delivered Professional Development training is to the members of our industry, it needs to be underpinned by a more formal industry focused education system. In order for us to have a strong career path for young people, we need to have support to ensure the availability of proper TAFE and tertiary-based technical training for our future wireless communications personnel. We need a national curriculum and managed system to deliver the specific training for niche industries like ours. There are no doubt other industries who suffer in similar ways to ours.

Over the past five years our industry has had extensive consultation with the TAFE sector to try and develop solutions to the current training dilemma that our industry finds itself in. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and share our ideas about skills training for our industry and how we might be able to see a future for our industry. In most instances, when Governments talk about apprentice training opportunities they think of the more well-known trades - however the radio and wireless communications industry has similar needs to the likes of construction and hospitality. - This is on a smaller scale but just as important to the Australian economy – our technology supports many other industries' safety and productivity. We seek changes to the current training system to better meet our industry needs.

Yours sincerely,

Australian Radio Communications Industry Association (ARCIA) Inc.

Ian Miller – Executive Officer

Cc – Hon. Steve Irons, Assistant Minister for Vocational Education, Training and Apprenticeships

Cc – Hon. Paul Fletcher, Minister for Communications, Cyber Security and the Arts

Cc – Hamish Duff, President ARCIA