

23 January 2024

SUBMISSION TO JOBS AND SKILLS AUSTRALIA – 2024-25 WORK PLAN DEVELOPMENT

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to Jobs and Skills Australia's 2024-25 work plan development. This consultation is important as the water sector is currently in a war for talent for critical roles and forecasts significant gaps in the future skills and capabilities that will be required to deliver essential services to a growing population.

The Water Services Association of Australia (WSAA) is the peak industry body representing the urban water sector. Our members provide water and sewerage services to over 24 million customers in Australia and New Zealand and many of Australia's largest industrial and commercial enterprises.

WSAA are a key stakeholder in the newly created BuildSkills Australia, formed as a National Jobs and Skills Council to improve the quality of jobs, skills and training in the building, construction, property and water industries.

We support the proposed future focus areas identified by Jobs and Skills Australia, and we consider the following roadmap opportunities as most important for Jobs and Skills Australia in 2024-25 to facilitate progress on due to their relevant to the urban water sector:

- **Opportunity 2** - Continue the dialogue between Jobs and Skills Australia, the states and territories and Jobs and Skills Councils on a nationally consistent approach for labour market and skills forecasting, and improve the coherence of workforce planning across regions and industries.
- **Opportunity 4** - Work with Jobs and Skills Councils to assess how the range of reforms implemented as a result of the National Skills Agreement, the Australian Universities Accord and migration reforms, help meet the skills needs of industry.
- **Opportunity 7** - Supporting the existing process of VET qualifications reform to enhance the adaptability, resilience and employment prospects of VET graduates.
- **Opportunity 8** - Identifying key enhancements in the evidence base that will assist the development of the roadmap and improve our ability to monitor its success, including in relations to the outcomes of learners and workers.
- **Opportunity 10** - Develop a regional Australia jobs and skills roadmap to identify the key steps in enhancing regional Australia's human capital in ways that will ensure success in meeting regional employment opportunities.
- **Opportunity 11** - Co-create a First Nations workforce roadmap in partnership with First Nations people and with key partners in the national skills system.

We also support integration of the Jobs and Skills Australia roadmap with industry specific strategies, plans and initiatives. The Australian Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) is currently progressing the renewal of the National Water Initiative (NWI). WSAA suggests Jobs and Skills Australia collaborate with DCCEEW to ensure the integration and alignment of the renewed NWI with the jobs and skills roadmap, work plans and other Jobs and Skills Australia functions.

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We have recommended to the Australian Government ([WSAA, 2023](#)) that the renewed NWI includes action on skills and training. The NWI can provide coordinated national policy support to:

1. Implement a national, standardised training program for water operators.
2. Better target grant/funding opportunities.
3. Align higher education and enhance the Vocational Education and Training sector's capacity, to meet sector needs.
4. Improve the water sector's presence in the VET reform process.
5. Address the market failure of inconsistency and overall quality of training resources.
6. Explore the merits of regulation on minimum competency standards.
7. Improve the transparency of critical roles i.e. representation within the Australian and New Zealand. Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) Codes.

Given the essential nature of our sector that is operating in a very competitive market we also request that the Jobs and Skills Australia roadmap place greater emphasis on:

- Improved strategic workforce planning capability to better forecast and target emerging and critical roles.
- Opportunities to elevate the profile of essential service sector skills and capabilities (such as the water sector).
- Recognition of the water sector's importance in the net zero transition challenge.
- Promotion of diverse, equitable and inclusive workforces.

Skills and training essential to maintain water and sewerage essential services

The urban water sector directly employs over 30,000 people. For every job created in our sector, another 4 jobs are created in the wider economy. Every dollar invested in urban water delivers an increase of \$2.40 in the economy. Australia's urban water capital expenditure is expected to grow from \$6 billion per year to a baseline of over \$10 billion per year in 2025-26.

Skill shortages and workforce development are critical issues facing the water sector for the continued provision of safe, reliable, and water and sewerage services. In a recent survey of WSAA member organisations, just over half had relatively low confidence levels in 6-10 years to deliver business objectives with current skills and capabilities. Around 20% of urban water utilities' staff are aged 55 or over.

This only reinforces the importance of Roadmap Opportunity 2, which highlights the need to improve strategic workforce planning capability. In addition, some of the critical roles will be important to support the net zero transition challenge (Opportunity 9).

Critical roles identified within the WSAA survey included:

- water and wastewater operators (including water quality technology and innovation roles)
- engineers (network, planning, electrical, mechanical, civil, dam safety, process, instrumentation)
- project managers (across a range of activities within the water sector)
- procurement specialists/contract managers
- water planning specialists/modellers
- information technology/data analysts (across a range of activities within the water sector)

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- finance (cost controller, cost estimator, CFO, regulatory specialists)
- energy (particularly renewable energy roles).

The above roles are not adequately reflected in the National Skills Priority List and in the ANZCO codes.

In addition, in the next 5 years WSAA members see a greater focus is being placed on project management, contract management and upskilling of our engineering workforce. There will be continuing demand for information technology skills, including data, cyber and network infrastructure.

Water operators should remain a key focus

Water operators work in water utilities operating and maintaining water supply and sewerage assets to ensure the safe and efficient provision of water supply and sewerage services to the community. Water operator roles include water treatment, sewage treatment and network management.

The Australia urban water sector faces a critical shortage of formally trained operators. This shortage increases the risk of water safety incidents that could compromise public and environmental health.

The shortage of formally trained water operators has several causes, which together result in a poorly functioning water operations training market. The causes include ([NSW Government, 2022](#)):

- The lack of any mandatory requirement for water operators to complete accredited training or hold qualifications.
- Low uptake of available national accredited water operations training.
- Difficulty attracting new operators to water utilities, and retaining existing skilled operators, particular in regional and remote Australian communities.
- Few registered training organisations offer water operations training.
- Shortage of accredited trainers, and lack of pathways for existing trainers to maintain training and technical skills.

Promotion of a diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce

Within the 14 potential roadmap opportunities, WSAA calls for a greater concentration on the promotion of diverse, equitable and inclusive workforces.

WSAA members have committed to improve inclusion and diversity in their organisations, implementing their own diversity, equity and inclusion strategies, equality action plans and Reconciliation Action Plans to drive continuous improvement, with significant achievements being delivered.

WSAA in partnership with the Australian Water Association and key stakeholders have recently developed a sector-wide careers campaign to attract and retain talent (www.careersinwater.com.au). The site is a hub for water career information, including a water sector-wide employee value proposition targeting and celebrating diverse critical talent segments, and includes branding and collateral.

First Nations water services

We support Jobs and Skills Australia proposed roadmap opportunity 11 to co-create a First Nations workforce roadmap in partnership with First Nations people and with key partners in the national skills system.

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WATER SERVICES
ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA

Not all Australians can turn on the tap and drink the water without concern. Many First Nations communities still do not have a reliable, monitored water supply. The Australian Government has invested an initial \$150 million to improve this situation. National collaboration is a vital element in Closing the Water Gap. We recommend a human centred program that uplifts the skills of community members and creates opportunities for First Nations businesses in culturally sensitive and affirming ways on a journey to self-empowerment.

We appreciate your considering our submission. To discuss the submission, you can contact Erin Cini, Director Strategy and Partnerships on mobile 0422 581 317 and email erin.cini@wsaa.asn.au.

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