Call to speed up job rules

Pip Freebairn

Industry groups have urged the federal and state governments to quickly implement a single set of national licences for certain jobs to make it easier for workers to take up jobs in other states.

State governments and business groups are consulting on a set of guidelines released by Skills Minister Chris Evans this week to introduce a single system of trade licensing for plumbers, real estate agents, conveyancers and air-conditioning mechanics.

The changes, if accepted by the states, would start from 2013 and end the need for employers to re-register workers. It is estimated the move would increase GDP by $86 million a year.

Industry said progress was too slow, given governments had agreed to the change in July 2008 and it was slated to begin in July this year.

Australian Industry Group training manager Megan Lilly said there were small issues with some of the guidelines but overall the reforms were long overdue and would replace a complex and disparate set of state-based licensing bodies.

Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry education and training director Stephen Bolton said some of the occupations were in short supply in the resource sector.
Cowper says tertiary site under review

NEW Training and Workforce Development Minister Murray Cowper says the site of a new higher education and TAFE facility in Busselton is still under review.

Earlier this year, former training minister Peter Collier said in a media report he supported planning for a South West Institute of Technology campus at Vasse.

However, Mr Cowper told the Times that an independent consultant had been engaged to assess suitable sites “so appropriate locations can be shortlisted”.

In media reports in March, Mr Collier said he agreed with Vasse MLA Troy Buswell’s observations of the shortcomings at the existing campus and the need to start planning for a new campus at Vasse, and expected a strategic infrastructure plan to have been completed by May.

Mr Cowper said the issue of the future training and higher education needs of Busselton and surrounding areas were being examined well before he took on the training portfolio.

“I have been briefed by the Department of Training and Workforce Development to gain an understanding of the issues,” Mr Cowper said.

“The Department’s goal for the Capes region (is) to provide contemporary training facilities that enable residents to live, train and work locally and support the social and economic development of the region.”

Last month, the Busselton and Districts Residents Association said a thorough investigation of potential sites close to Busselton should be undertaken, with more community consultation.

The group also wrote to the State Government and other stakeholders to ask for information on why the Vasse site appeared to have been chosen for a new facility.

Last month the Capes Regional Organisation of Councils recommended that the chairman send a formal written request to Mr Cowper asking for clarification on the request for a funding commitment for a Capes region higher education and training facility feasibility study.
Online learning platforms can suffer from bad design, poor delivery or worse. Andy Kollmorgen reports.

The online education and training industry in Australia grew 22% per year between 2006 and 2011, and currently generates an estimated $4bn in annual turnover. As of last year it employed about 16,500 people across 856 businesses. That’s a lot of teaching and training, and a lot of money. And those figures don’t include universities or training centres that offer less than 80% of their courses online.

Market expansion at this pace can leave consumers vulnerable to poor service and fraud, with regulation forced to play catch-up. And, in some cases at least, the online learning industry is no exception. Consumers who contacted CHOICE about online courses said lack of certainty around testing and certification, funny business with fees and patchy technical support were the major issues they’d encountered.

“Make sure you find out about exams and how you get your certification and if you have to pay for exams,” Walter Buratto tells us. He bailed out of an online information technology course because it “just gave you access to all certifications but no advice about where to start if you were new to IT. Email support wouldn’t answer your questions directly and every time it was a different person.”

Andrea Eves agrees. “Sometimes I wonder why we have to pay so much when the available support is limited.”

Uneven market
Anyone can set up an online learning or training program, so how do you know if...
Choice, National  
01 Aug 2012, by Andy Kollmorgen

General News, page 34 - 3,007.25 cm²  
Magazines Lifestyle - circulation 150,000 (Monthly)

In the first five months of 2012, NSW Fair Trading received an average of 10 complaints a month in relation to online courses, with a lack of technical support among the top complaints. Consumers also had to chase after refunds because the business closed down, or they were promised study material that never arrived. They also complained about misrepresented course content or accreditation value, as well as about costs being added after the course had started.

NSW Fair Trading is less than sanguine about some segments of the industry. "Each year we receive complaints from students about training and educational courses regarding fees and refunds, misleading information and course quality," a spokesperson told us. "Consumers are advised to be wary when selecting vocational education and training courses."

Consumer Affairs Victoria says online training and education businesses should be on notice that the new Australian Consumer Law regime has tightened the reins and makes it a crime to "make statements that are misleading or deceptive or would be likely to mislead or deceive" or "rely on small print and disclaimers."

Is it legit?

One easy way to avoid being duped is to make sure the course is listed on training.gov.au, a recently launched national register of training organisations and accredited courses. A listing ensures the course can deliver nationally recognised qualifications, but is no guarantee that it will be well run or the digital platform well designed. And if you’re forced to seek assistance, the kind of customer service frustration commonly associated with telcos may be in store.

If you find yourself spending more time figuring out how to make the online platform work than learning the material, and if support is hard to come by – or the quality of the course doesn’t live up to its advertising – the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) will take your complaint, as long as the course is run by a registered training organisation (RTO). This federal agency acts as a watchdog to ensure RTOs deliver vocational education and training that meets nationally approved standards. Another federal initiative, the Australian Qualifications

DESIGN AND DELIVERY

Professor Ron Oliver, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning at WA’s Edith Cowan University, wrote a paper in 2011 laying out some of the pitfalls of online learning in its early days, including problems in "the achievement and maintenance of quality in online learning delivery."

Professor Oliver told us recently that design and delivery performance is still more inconsistent across the industry than it should be, mainly because there aren’t enough course designers skilled in translating the teaching experience to a digital platform. A "known problems" page compiled for users of the University of Tasmania’s online curriculum, to take one example, lists a formidable array of roadblocks.

"There are far more course providers than capable designers," Oliver says. "Only the best platforms successfully integrate the subject expertise of the teacher with the design and delivery skills of an IT professional, and only the best providers have such resources on hand. In the absence of more qualified personnel, teachers tend to take on both roles."

"Effective online learning takes a different set of skills than teaching face to face," Professor Oliver says. "The difference between a good online course and a bad one is whether it merely replicates the training manual or textbook and adds the all-important element of learning design. A lot of subject experts take on the design and delivery while they’re still figuring out how to put an online course together. The result can be an unengaging and one-dimensional course. Universities, and course providers in general, stake their reputations on the quality of their content and how it’s delivered, so there’s a built-in incentive to do well. But there’s also a talent shortage."

In the end, students have to rely on the integrity of the course provider."

For Oliver, good learning design means giving students ample opportunity to interact with the teacher and other students and use functions that “engage the learner with designed activities that foster communication and collaboration.”
Choice, National
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The quality of the online training platform can make or break any course of study

Not far behind these are training delivery and the quality of the trainers.

ASQA prepared an up-to-date complaint report for CHOICE, which showed that assessment methods and processes form the highest complaint category, followed by marketing tactics.

ASQA corporate communications manager Diana Martinez says the online environment has built-in shortcomings when it comes to “assessing competencies” and that the authority has concerns about “how training providers ensure the validity and authenticity of assessment, and how the online training materials meet the requirements of the national industry competency standards”. Martinez says ASQA is in the process of updating a checklist on its website (see asqa.gov.au) to help consumers avoid dodgy operators.

How good is the learning?

Even if the online course delivers as promised, there’s a question of whether the quality of learning is as good as what you’d receive in a classroom environment. One recent US study of tertiary schools indicated dropout rates for online courses are about 20% higher than for classroom courses. That could add up to big numbers at operations such as the University of Phoenix Online Campus, which has 380,322 enrolments (the highest number of enrolments of all US universities, at last count).

Tim Roberts, a senior lecturer at Central Queensland University’s School of Information and Communication Technology, makes the same point in a 2007 paper, arguing online courses “notoriously suffer from higher than average attrition rates, often because of [students’] feelings of isolation”. His solution is to recreate classroom dynamics in the online world by maximising student and teacher interaction. Roberts told us that research “would seem to indicate that, statistically, there is little or no real difference in learning outcomes” between online and classroom courses, but stressed group participation makes a big difference when you’re learning online.

Roberts says teachers and online administrators “should encourage students to participate via video sessions, forums, email or whatever other facilities are made available. The level of participation has been shown to be a good indicator of success”.

But that may not be enough when it comes to vocational education and training, according to Martinez. She says the “competency-based” nature of the material means “there are skill requirements that may not be effectively developed in learners using online delivery of training”.

Regardless of the standard of training and education, the quality of the online training platform – and whether you and your computer can figure it out – can make or break any course of study.

Need to know

Is the online training business registered and, if so, by which authority?

Does the course lead to a qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework?

What are the computer and software requirements, and what level of computer literacy will be required?

Is there support available for technical issues?

Don’t make up-front payments until you’re sure the course is officially recognised and meets your needs.

Read the training contract carefully before you sign it and check the cancellation and refund conditions.

Get a copy of the student handbook and make sure you understand the grievance and appeals policy.
FIVE Australian universities are among the world’s 100 best tertiary institutions, according to new rankings.

The University of Melbourne, Australian National University, the University of Queensland, the University of Sydney and the University of Western Australia are among the top 100 in Academic Rankings of World Universities, published yesterday.

Australia had 19 of its 37 universities listed in the top 500.

Universities Australia said the nation had the third highest number of universities in the list.

“This demonstrates the nation’s commitment to having a world-class university system,” chief executive Belinda Robinson said.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said the result showed the Government’s investment in universities was paying off.

“This is an outstanding result when you consider the top two countries have significantly more universities,” Mr Evans said.

He noted there were 4495 in the US and 115 in Britain.
The mining boom has sparked a shortage of qualified electricians in town and attracting sparkies is near impossible, according to several Geraldton-based electrical companies.

Skills Minister Chris Evans echoed the assertion and said the mining industry was sucking up a lot of people with trades, and “there was not a lot” that could be done about it.

“You can’t go around telling people what job to take if they are getting a better offer and paid more,” Minister Evans said.

He said regional areas are particularly affected because there were mines close to home offering attractive wages. Mr Evans said the federal Government expected mining companies to offer traineeships to Australian residents if they were to give jobs to people from overseas.

Geraldton’s GCo Electrical’s Murray Hadley said it was only getting harder to find qualified sparkies.

Mr Hadley said mining had been taking people away from town jobs for a number of years.

“I don’t think it is going to get any better, I think it will get harder if anything,” he said.

Mr Hadley said his company’s strategy was to offer local people apprenticeships, and it works, as they retain over half in-house trained staff.

Apprentice and Traineeship Company general manager Dave Clare said it was important to invest in training to keep people entering the trade.

He said students treated their trade as something to fall back on but would often go to the mines and work in completely different fields.

Electrician Marc O’Brien of Marc O’Brien Electrical said with growing work opportunities in town he was seeking more electricians.

Mr O’Brien agreed the mining boom had created a shortage of sparkies in town.

He said while his company handles bigger work in remote areas and mine sites, it was committed to quickly responding to residential work and no job was too small.
TWO former Monivae students have been recognised for their commitment to their school-based apprenticeships by receiving Australian Vocational student prizes. Students Luke Parfrey and Hayley Elsom graduated in 2011 and were each awarded a $2000 prize and a certificate from the Federal Government for their achievements.

They were among 500 who received the award, announced by Acting Education minister, Chris Evans. Mr Evans said it was important students were acknowledged for their hard work and commitment when undertaking a school-based apprenticeship.

“Through their studies, winners of these awards have gained a better understanding of the workplace, and have developed industry-specific skills that will help them get work in their chosen career,” he said.

Mr Parfrey has since obtained full-time employment and was also the 2011 school-based apprentice of the year, while Ms Elsom also gained full-time work and completed a number of vocational studies through TAFE.

Compulsory education is pivotal in nation’s ‘life’

Each individual has one or more pivotal points in his/her life such as falling in love, attaining a qualification, the birth of a first child etc, but rarely do we think of pivotal points in the life of a nation. I was reflecting on this and began to consider that the fundamental event for a nation must have been the introduction of compulsory education for children.

This law was not instigated for altruistic reasons but purely economic ones. It was found that the tax base increased for a town or community with an increase in the educational standard.

Other benefits flow from such an increase such as a more tolerant and civil society. The army also welcomed the higher standards of recruits. Education does not automatically produce better people (Stalin was educated) but the possibilities are greater. There is a higher chance that educated people may treat others with respect and prevent friction from developing in society resulting in such awful events as in Syria.

The need for some of us (politicians, statesmen, philosophers and, dare I say it, theologians) to help with the political, intellectual and moral values of a nation requires a high-level education.

We do need an element of people who may be considered with “think tank abilities” to be reflecting on our future.

The difficult decision is to be brave enough to tell society that we simple must educate for “training purposes”, difficult disciplines and “higher purposes”. We also must be accountable for producing employable graduates and those funds are being used to support a “tertiary finishing school” for young ladies and gentlemen.

Graham Cooper,
Emu Park
Call to boost TAFE funding

A review of higher education has recommended making the accreditation system for students to transfer from TAFE to university less complicated and suggested that funding for vocational training courses should be equal to that for universities.

The Liberal MP Gabrielle Upton, who chaired the NSW government review of pathways into tertiary education, said “skills training is just as important as doing higher level degrees”. She said the government would need to lobby the Commonwealth for a fairer distribution of grants.

The inquiry’s report identified obstacles, including a lack of funding, that prevented fair access to higher education.

Ms Upton said TAFE students paid administration fees that university students did not have to pay.

The report recommended the NSW government should expand the number of combined programs.

Anna Patty
Skills transfer request to PM

The government’s hand-picked manufacturing taskforce will today call for a new skills package to enable manufacturing workers to adapt to new technologies to improve the competitiveness of their production lines.

The non-government members of the taskforce will hand their report to Julia Gillard today. They say the manufacturing sector needs assistance to recruit and retain workers whose skills are in demand from the resources industry.

Small firms could be offered expert assistance to access training programs after recent findings that they had trouble identifying suitable schemes.

The top-level taskforce, which was chaired by the Prime Minister, included a swath of ministers, chief executives of major companies and unions.

It was formed as manufacturing struggles under the weight of a high Australian dollar which has decimated their export markets.

The Australian understands the taskforce report will also address calls from some industry leaders — including DuPont chief Andrew Liveris — to reserve gas supplies to provide a cheap energy source for domestic manufacturers.

The proposition faces strong government opposition, with the looming energy white paper expected to reject the measure.

Energy Minister Martin Ferguson last week said he opposed the reservation of gas reserves for domestic production.

The taskforce is also expected to recommend a continued focus on research and development amid speculation that the government will rebadge some already-announced funding to link manufacturing to university research.

The Prime Minister announced a $250 million plan last December as part of a commitment to transform manufacturing by helping the private sector draw on university research to develop new businesses.

The program was cut to $236m in May and the government failed to meet its deadline to issue guidelines.

However Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said last week the program was “being developed” and the government was committed to implementing it.

The Australian understands the taskforce has also examined calls for improving the literacy and numeracy of the workforce.

SID MAHER