



AUSTRALIAN FLEXIBLE PAVEMENT ASSOCIATION

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING SUBMISSION

2023



ABOUT AfPA

The Australian Flexible Pavement Association (AfPA) is the peak industry body that represent the flexible pavements industry, delivering safe and sustainable outcomes to benefit communities across Australia.

For over 50 years, AfPA has brought together our dynamic and multifaceted multibillion dollar industry that is responsible for the design, specification, manufacture, construction, and maintenance of all forms of bituminous flexible pavements. AfPA's members constitute a diverse array of professional organisations who support the industry and are passionate and committed to advancing flexible pavement technology for the benefit of the road user and broader community.

AfPA members include bitumen suppliers, asphalt producers, sprayed surface operators, major consultancies, suppliers (such as equipment providers, line markers and profiler contractors) and all State Government Road Authorities, and many Local Governments from across Australia.

AfPA's Vision embodies three key objectives:

- to support industry be healthy, safe, innovative, and adaptive to change, acting as a platform for industry sustainability,
- to support the national harmonisation of best industry practices, promoting the benefits of the flexible pavements industry,
- to drive a national culture of continuous improvement.

AfPA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training concerning the perceptions and status of vocational education and training. We are firmly committed to working with all levels of Government towards building a stronger and more skilled workforce, who will be the foundations of a better-connected Australia.

FLEXIBLE PAVEMENT INDUSTRY SNAPSHOT

Across all aspects of our day-to-day lives, roads bring us together, facilitating all functions of our social fabric and economic activities. The ongoing viability, level of service and safety is entirely dependent on the significant contributions of all levels of Government to new projects and maintenance of the existing network, and equally a skilled competent workforce to deliver on these commitments.


We welcome and share the committee's concern for the assessment and improvement of VET. The committee's search to understand the current perceptions of VET and the challenges our members face in 'bridging the gap' to clearer pathways and opportunities is most accurately summed up by addressing the following challenges:

- Visibility
- Opportunity

According to the Australian Local Government Association, roads account for 39% of total local government infrastructure, with a replacement cost of \$204B. Of these roads, \$17.8bn are in poor condition, \$16.0bn have poor function, and \$14.3bn have poor capacity. This indicates that 8% of sealed roads and 14% of unsealed roads are in poor condition, function and capacity and close to reaching the end of their useful life (ALGA 2021).

From this information, it is clear that Australia, now more than ever, requires a highly skilled and healthy workforce. AfPA believes by addressing visibility challenges for school leavers and creating opportunities for engagement with the industry, we can incentivise a healthy pipeline of young-skilled workers to fill needed positions.

The urgent need for road work, innovation and maintenance has highlighted that we must take a longer-term, more proactive approach to incentivising and attracting a healthy workforce.



VISIBILITY – An issue of awareness

AfPA and its members' experience with recruitment and young professionals has brought to our attention a significant and problematic issue of lack of visibility of the flexible pavement industry among prospective skilled workers. There exists a significant visibility issue in relation to Australian students' journey through secondary schools, vocational education, higher education, and work transitions in relation to the multi-billion-dollar flexible pavement industry. We identify that this challenge exists both in terms of general non-promotion and false perceptions of the industry. The recurring complaint we hear from members and those who do find their way into industry, that there simply isn't an identified career pathway for the industry, nor sufficient information available concerning what qualifications should be undertaken to join the industry.

Currently, governments at all levels have committed to continuous and growing funding for our critical road infrastructure without consideration of the dire shortfall of skilled workers able to meet this demand. AfPA and its members have identified a significant lack of awareness around the financial and educational opportunities offered to school leavers and young people looking to enter the workforce within our industry, which must be addressed.

Other obstacles to attracting a healthy and skilled workforce within our industry includes the severe lack of training and qualification opportunities within Australia. As example, to become a certified road pavement engineer, a crucial role for safe roads, students would currently need to travel overseas to receive qualification. This means that inevitably, we lose a lot of our skilled potential workers to overseas markets.

Increasing the visibility of our industry and the significant opportunities presented to young people looking to enter the workforce would ensure a healthy pipeline of skilled workers who would service Australia's most significant asset, its roads.

OPPORTUNITY

AfPA believes that to address visibility challenges and perceptions of VET more broadly, improvements must be made through investment in more active and diverse engagement with young people and tangible improvements to training opportunities. For our industry, this might look like working with year ten leavers to introduce them to the industry and the procurement of surfacing as a school-based traineeship, highlighting pathways for success and upskilling with government support.

Unofficially, the industry currently offers young people just entering the workforce a salary of approximately \$65,000.00 per annum from their first day. Perks such as these and the opportunity to actively contribute to the health and safety outcomes of millions, if marketed appropriately, would lead to far more interest than it currently garners.

AfPA would appreciate further opportunities to collaborate alongside government to develop campaigns and exposure for the industry to help elevate understanding and perceptions of the industry to encourage a healthy workforce.

SKILLS

Beyond working with young people to raise awareness of the industry, providing attractive, Australian training opportunities would help attract younger people to recognize the industry as a legitimate and prosperous one. Those who deliver the nation's highest order roads should possess qualifications specific to this industry to ensure quality, safety, long term durability, performance, and workforce sustainability, identifying career pathways through industry.

As the nation's leading industry association for bituminous surfacing, AfPA, in conjunction with Industry and stakeholders, has developed an Industry Skills Card and has been compiling a significant library of industry specific resources that create a VET unit of competency to be utilised by affiliated RTOs. These resources will be retained and shared through the association to ensure the latest practical knowledge training is provided to the Flexible Pavements Industry.

These skill sets have been designed to be transferable between employers and State boundaries and recognised nationally. The qualification needs to be recognised as a trade equivalent that provides confidence to procurers and promotes attraction and retention of talent to the industry. This can only happen if authorities implement the skills card into the procurement process.

Under the new Skills Card, Australia's roads are set to become safer and more skillfully built than ever through a set of specially designed part qualifications introduced under the national qualification RII30920 Certificate III in Civil Construction – Bituminous Surfacing, designed to improve the nation's workforce and road building skills. Supporting a healthy pipeline of skilled road surfacing workers, who are fully accredited and upskilled, will not only lead to a more innovative and responsive industry but will also lead to a better-connected, better-functioning economy and society.

MIGRATION

Whilst we recommend commencing work on creating improvements that will improve the flow of skilled Australian workers into the industry, we must meet the current shortage by reforming pathways via Immigration Laws to access lower skilled visa entry for labourers interested in working in Australia.

Migration has a crucial role in contributing to the future success of Australia's economy, with 7% of the Australian workforce alone comprising temporary migrants. Increased Government infrastructure spending has left the construction and roadwork industry struggling to meet high demands as we grapple with labour and skills shortages. AfPA advocates for a higher intake of migrants and agrees that at least 200,000 migrants a year, an increase from 160,000, are needed for the next two years to fill the labour skills crisis in Australia.

A report by Infrastructure Australia found that two-thirds of occupations relevant to public infrastructure are facing a labour shortage; half of these are engineers, scientists and architects, with expectations of a further shortfall of 89,000, compared to 29,000 tradespeople and labourers.

For an industry that contributes \$207 billion annually to the economy and supports 1.3 million jobs, Government intervention is needed to attract and retain international talent to not only ensure the best safety and procurement processes but to be able to provide safe and reliable roads for Australian communities.

Best Practice

Whenever possible, AfPA conducts International Knowledge Transfers (IKT), designed to share and teach best practices for industry education overseas. From our experience, Australia is in danger of significantly lagging behind other nations in the areas of industry education and standards. The importance remains in cementing clear education opportunities for students leaving tertiary school and cultivating industry workers a choice to expand their qualifications. Developing proper vocational training services is therefore crucial for roadworkers as they equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge to perform their jobs safely and effectively.

The following highlight international best practices that AfPA believe can serve as a reference point:

- **Wirtgen Group**, a German-based company, offers trainees practical projects, in-house training courses, participation in corporate events, workshops, and the Trainee Technology Days where trainees work together on a real road construction project under their direction and are equipped with the tools, knowledge, and skills on how to pursue a technical career. With over 380 trainees, the company employs over a third of its workforce in accredited vocational training programs.

In 2019, WG launched its “Think Big” campaign providing trainees with a comprehensive education in technical fields related to the road construction equipment and machinery industry. Trainees are given the opportunity to gain hands-on experience through apprenticeships and internships while exposing them to the latest technologies and innovations in the industry through live workshops, which encourage participants to use cutting-edge technology like HAMM drum and a WIRTGEN small milling machine. Similarly, through the company’s “Trainee Technology Days”, trainees are offered hands-on experience with the help of service technicians and trainers to complete three construction projects. This included installing a new surface course for a test track and paved asphalt as well as repairing damage using advanced machinery.

Industry programs like such diversify the options trainees have in embracing a career in the industry through its visibility, all while contributing to the growth and development of the road construction equipment and machinery sector. Government funding and investment in vocational training programs are needed to help thrive the demand for industry workers.

- **Caterpillar**, a US-based company, has launched a ThinkBIG program to enable aspiring technicians earn an accredited degree while gaining practical work experience in the heavy equipment industry. The two-year program provides workshops and paid internships at a sponsoring Cat dealership, where trainees work alongside technicians to learn how to operate advanced machinery relevant to their field. Upon completion, participants amass over 2,000 hours of work experience and are well-equipped to succeed as dealer technicians.

One way to minimise unsafe work environments is to educate industry workers via safety training courses. This includes trainees and experienced industry workers maximizing their understanding of equipment usage, increasing ROI and reducing costly downtime. Caterpillar, provides easy-to-access, interactive safety guides like virtual simulations for workers, ensuring that continuous learning is encouraged in the workplace.

Visibility and opportunity work hand in hand. It requires a greater commitment, consultation and collaboration between industry leaders and Government to invest in the adequate training programs, and more importantly, to promote tertiary students the benefits of tradesmanship prior to graduation.

AfPA STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Our strategic priorities aligning with the Skills Guarantee Discussion Paper are as outlined below:

Health and Safety

AfPA is firmly committed to promoting a continuous improvement health and safety culture across our industry. It is recognised that one of the highest risks for our industry is frontline workers exposed to traffic.

Road workers put themselves at risk to deliver the infrastructure Australian drivers are demanding. Unfortunately, it is some of these same drivers who are putting these workers at risk. It is paramount to AfPA and our members to enable and support industry to continuously improve the health and safety of our people and the communities we serve.

Sustainability

AfPA promotes sustainability on three fronts, our people, the environment and economy:

- AfPA leads the knowledge requirements for our industry in developing skills that underpin the new jobs being created to support Australia's economic recovery and supports the inclusion and growth of diversity.
- AfPA advocates for the continual improvement in environmental sustainability that works towards circular economy practices. This includes our industry doing its part in addressing the use of renewable materials to control waste.
- AfPA advocates for sustainable funding of Australia's most valuable asset – our roads. In particular, the preservation and protection of the major investment that has been made in this asset connect communities and contribute to Australia's economic competitiveness.

Collaboration and Partnership

AfPA drives a partnership culture with all its stakeholders to promote the delivery of outcomes that benefits members and Australia.

Knowledge and Innovation

AfPA works to promote a continuous improvement culture that demonstrates to members a commitment to best engineering practices and promotes the removal of barriers to innovation. We strive to enhance opportunities for members to implement innovative products and technologies in flexible pavement engineering applications.

Technology

In flexible pavement construction and engineering practice, AfPA works to:

- Introduce and harmonise best practice;
- Support continual improvement, and;
- Unlock the potential of industry innovation.

AfPA delivers national and international knowledge relating to the best:

- health and safety
 - circular economy practice/sustainability
 - best construction and manufacturing practice
 - contractual practices
 - engineering; and
 - use of digital technology.
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