



01 MAR, 2025

Building a skilled workforce for the future

Rail Express

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The Australasian Railway Association (ARA) is working to attract and retain the talent our industry needs.



Caroline Wilkie, Chief Executive Officer, Australasian Railway Association

Just over a year ago, the ARA released a significant report on the skills gaps and workforce shortages facing the Australian rail industry.

The report, *The Rail Workforce – An Analytical Overview*, was prepared by the United Kingdom's National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR) on behalf of the ARA, to better understand the current skills issues in the post-pandemic environment.

It found the industry had a 70,000 shortfall and about 35 per cent of the workforce would retire by 2035, with almost a third of train drivers currently aged over 55.

The report makes it clear that the future of Australia's rail industry cannot just rely on technological advancements and infrastructure improvements – it also needs a highly skilled workforce to support its growth.

Workforce development is a key focus for the ARA and we are driving forward a strong advocacy agenda through education,

partnerships, and innovative training programs that are designed to ensure the sector can attract, retain, and grow the talent it needs to meet current and future demands.

A core focus of the ARA's workforce development efforts is securing national resources that will help rail attract and retain skilled professionals. As the rail industry grows, so too does the demand for talent with specialised skills.

In 2024, the ARA launched a variety of new training initiatives, including new courses through its Learning Management System (LMS) and collaborations with leading universities. These partnerships promise to bring forward industry-ready graduates with the expertise necessary to support the rail sector's evolving needs.

FORGING UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

One of the most exciting developments has been the ARA's collaboration with Edith Cowan University (ECU), which will lead to the creation of three new undergraduate

engineering electives in civil, mechanical and electrical engineering, expected to be available by mid-2025. The courses, developed with input from major industry players like Rio Tinto, ARC Infrastructure, and the Public Transport Authority of Western Australia, will be made publicly accessible to ensure that professionals across the sector have opportunities to upskill.

This initiative demonstrates the power of collaboration between industry and academia in creating a sustainable and highly skilled workforce.

The flexibility of these courses also allows them to be offered as short courses, ensuring that they are accessible to professionals who may not need an entire degree program but wish to advance their industry knowledge.

In a similar vein, Deakin University has partnered with the ARA and industry experts to launch two new micro-credentials that will also be offered as electives in undergraduate engineering degrees: Rail Engineering – Planning and Maintenance and Rail Engineering – Design. They will also be curated as one elective, which will be available to students completing an undergraduate and postgraduate Civil Engineering Degree program.

These are credit-bearing micro-credentials, so will provide advanced standing in a range of degree and post graduate courses, offering students and professionals alike an opportunity to fast-track their learning in this critical sector. By offering these micro-credentials, the ARA is not just supporting the current workforce but also helping to build a future-ready talent pipeline.

Monash University, through its Institute of Rail Technology (IRT), has recently introduced a Railway Engineering unit and a Graduate Research Industry Partnership (GRIP) Program, further broadening academic and professional opportunities in rail engineering.

The ARA is also exploring similar opportunities with the University of Tasmania (UTAS) for a proposed Graduate Diploma in Rail Signalling.



The ARA is committed to increasing diversity and inclusion in the rail workforce

IMAGE: GEMCO

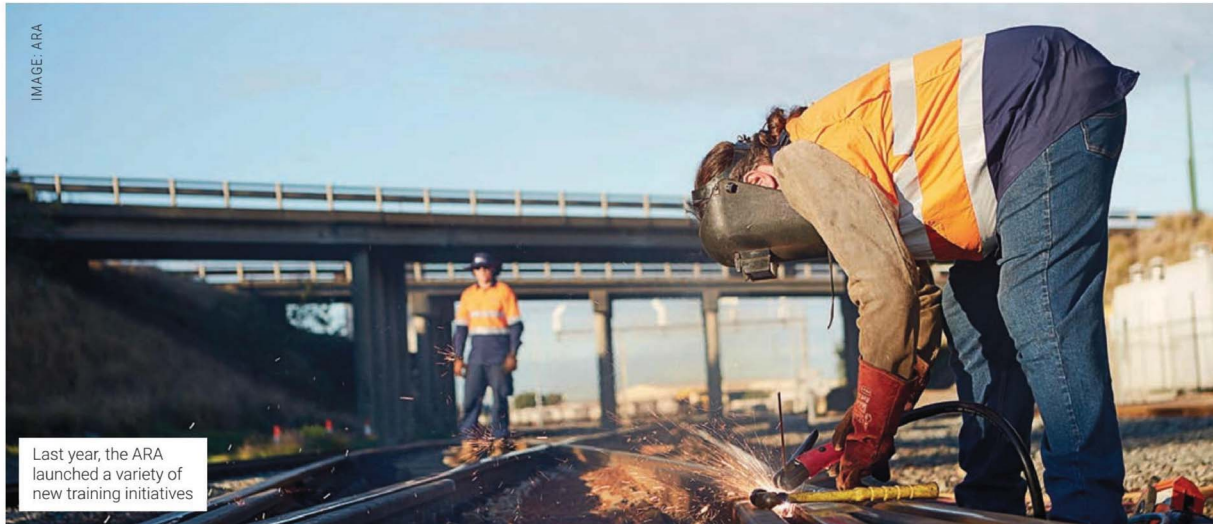


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Last year, the ARA launched a variety of new training initiatives

TAFE AND INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

A key strategic focus for the ARA is bringing TAFE across Australia into the rail training resource pool.

Our partnership with North Metro TAFE in Perth has proven that government, industry, and educational institutions can come together to create robust, high-quality training programs. This collaboration has led to the development of a range of rail-specific courses, including the Certificate II and III in Rail Infrastructure, as well as Certificate IV programs in Rail Signalling and Network Operations.

These TAFE programs provide students with the practical skills and industry connections they need to succeed in the rail sector. For example, companies like Rio Tinto and ARC Infrastructure have provided essential support, including uniforms, toolkits, and even job placements, to ensure that students gain hands-on experience that makes them job-ready upon completion.

Such initiatives not only contribute to the individual success of students but also provide the rail industry with a steady flow of well-trained workers. The ARA would like to see these courses rolled out nationally.

We have also been working with North Metro TAFE and other RTOs to deliver the Rail Operations Fundamentals Skill Set (ROFSS), which is made up of seven national units of competence found in multiple Certificate II and III rail accredited courses, and is due for release mid-year.

The underlying intention of developing this nationally recognised course and having it delivered by TAFE is to provide access to recognised rail learning that does not require participants to be employees. It is

hoped that this will build a talent pool of people who have acquired an entry level of competence and are genuinely interested in a future career in rail.

The ARA marked a major milestone late last year in the harmonisation of competencies with agreement to implement an online, harmonised Safety Access the Rail Corridor (SARC) course for heavy haul members in the Pilbara, Western Australia.

The ARA has been working with BHP, Rio Tinto and Roy Hill to build a national, common SARC course to streamline training requirements for contractors entering the rail corridor.

SARC is a unit of competency that everyone who enters any rail corridor in Australia is required to hold. Despite this, many companies still deliver their own bespoke courses.

Members of the ARA Workforce Development team are planning the implementation of the agreed SARC course on behalf of the three heavy haul companies, which will now require all their employees and contractors to have completed it over a 36-month time frame.

This is a really exciting development. The ARA has made significant advances in the age-old problem of rail industry worker qualifications and competencies not being recognised from one rail infrastructure manager (RIM) or operating company to another, which has impeded productivity across the supply chain, and for RIMs and rail operators. Mutual recognition, TAFE delivery and the engagement of all RIMs in an Australian state is a first for the industry.

By having a common SARC, the three heavy haul companies will now only need

to brief or train contractors on risks relevant to their rail corridor and the specific work to which the contractors have been assigned, rather than them having to undergo multiple courses to meet the needs of different RIMs.

North Metro TAFE in Western Australia will deliver the SARC course, ensuring the highest levels of quality and reliability of course delivery.

The ARA aims to have all the Western Australia RIMs recognising a single SARC which will reduce costs to both contractors and rail companies, support safety in the rail corridor and provide critical evidence across Australia of the benefits of mutual recognition of competence.

SUPPORTING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The rapid pace of digitisation and decarbonisation in the rail sector has further underscored the need for continuous skills development.

To address this, the ARA is working on developing a comprehensive micro-credential framework to provide flexible, fast, and nationally recognised pathways for workers to upskill and reskill in critical areas such as signalling, digital technologies, and decarbonisation.

This framework will help streamline the process of skills development across the industry, ensuring that rail workers can quickly gain the competencies needed to navigate the changing landscape of the sector.

One of the key benefits of this framework is its ability to reduce the time and cost associated with traditional training methods. With the rise of micro-credentials, the rail industry will have more agile and



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efficient ways to upskill the workforce, while also promoting greater consistency and portability of qualifications across different jurisdictions.

Last year, we introduced two new courses – Introduction to Rollingstock and Rail Operations, and are rolling out Introduction to Rail Infrastructure this year.

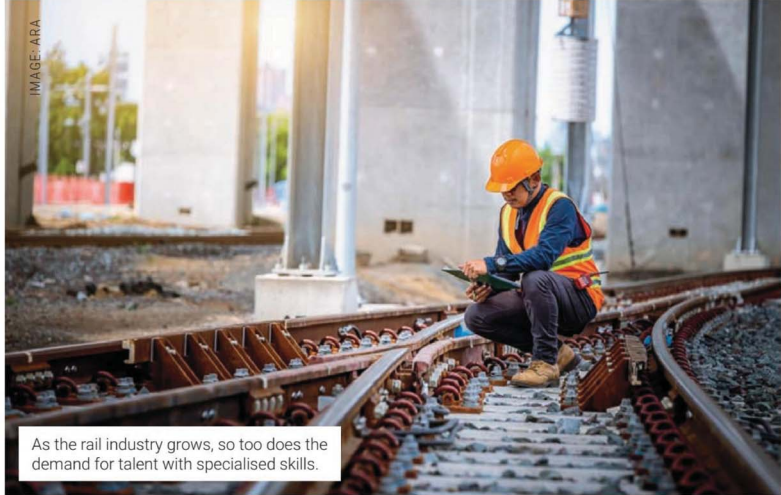
They provide valuable educational opportunities to both newcomers and seasoned professionals in the rail sector. Feedback from participants in these courses has been overwhelmingly positive, with many learners praising the courses for providing critical knowledge that will help them advance in their careers.

We are particularly excited about our new, 25-week, industry-accredited ARA Professional Certificate in Rail, which was launched at AusRAIL last year and commenced in March. The certificate embeds all of our five courses, with live webinars and an optional site visit. All learning is undertaken online through the ARA Learning platform. Each participant receives a Certificate of Completion and a Credly Badge that can be added to their LinkedIn profile.

FOSTERING A DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

The ARA is committed to increasing diversity and inclusion in the rail workforce and has conducted extensive research over the past year to support this.

This year we will be offering ARA Diversity Training webinars, designed to assist in cultivating an inclusive and welcoming workplace culture, enhance communication and teamwork, increase cultural competence and offer tools to improve diversity in the rail workforce.



As the rail industry grows, so too does the demand for talent with specialised skills.

Additionally, the Workforce Development team has developed a Respect in Rail course as a next step for organisations that have previously engaged in Respect@Work training. This new course focuses on strengthening employees' understanding of respect in the workplace, emphasising its importance in promoting a culture of safety, inclusion and diversity within the rail industry. We have made this course free for everyone in the rail industry, regardless if they are a member of the ARA, as part of our commitment to improving the workplace environment. By completing this training, employees play a key role in shaping a more welcoming and supportive environment, making the rail sector an even more desirable place to work.

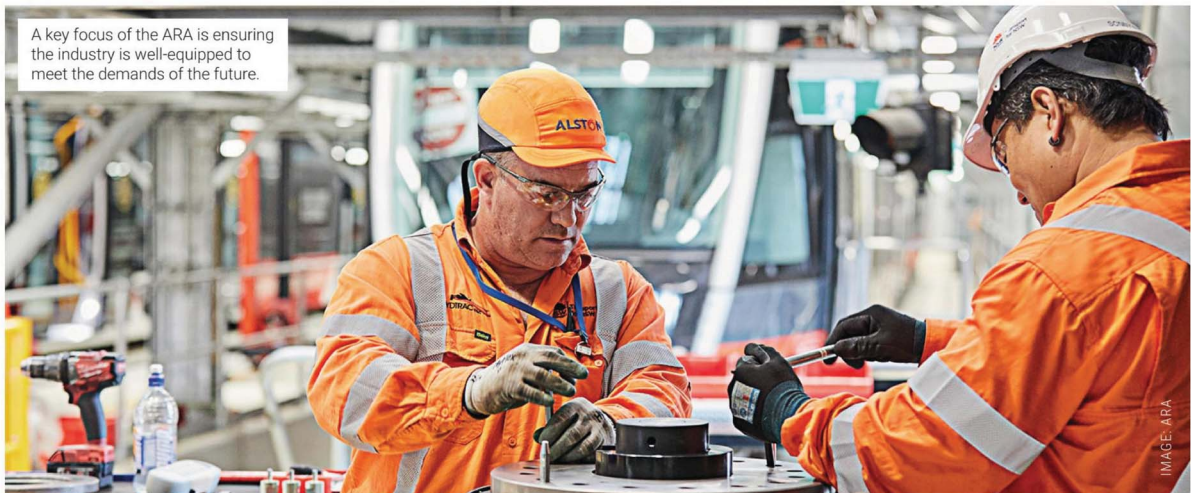
LOOKING AHEAD FOR 2025

The ARA's Workforce Development initiatives

are aimed at ensuring the rail industry remains strong and is well-equipped to meet the demands of a rapidly changing future. By fostering strong partnerships with education institutions, industry leaders and government, the ARA is helping to secure the future rail workforce needed to drive the industry forward.

Looking ahead, the ARA's focus on flexible and accessible learning, innovation, and collaboration with industry and government will continue to be key in addressing the challenges posed by technological advancements, decarbonisation, and the growing demand for rail services.

The foundation laid by these workforce development efforts will ensure that the rail sector remains adaptable, resilient, and capable of meeting the needs of a modern, sustainable transportation system.



A key focus of the ARA is ensuring the industry is well-equipped to meet the demands of the future.