

National leadership to address the truck driver shortage

NatRoad Policy Statement

Executive summary

- Australia has a truck driver shortage of over 26,000 unfilled positions.
- National Cabinet must establish a National Road Freight Workforce Action Plan (the Action Plan) to resolve and co-ordinate key policy reforms.
- The Action Plan must establish a National Truck Driver Standard, deliver the apprenticeship, create a National Heavy Vehicle Skills Hub, establish incentives, reform licensing and training, and improve career pathways.

Australia's truck driver shortage is an urgent economic crisis.

Road freight is projected to increase by 77 percent from 2020 to 2050.¹ We already face a driver shortage of over 26,000 unfilled positions. If trucking stops, Australia stops.

Heavy vehicles are the backbone of our nation. The heavy vehicle industry not only sustains our quality of life, but underpins Australia's prosperity and international influence, providing essential support to our community and the world in times of need.

– NHVR, Draft Heavy Vehicle Productivity Plan 2024 – 2029

In the pandemic Australians experienced what happens when supply chains buckle – supermarket shelves are empty and the essential goods we take for granted do not show up.

NatRoad – International Road Transport Union (IRU) truck driver shortage survey

In 2024, NatRoad brought the global IRU truck driver shortage survey to Australia for the first time. With strong engagement from industry, the survey has quantified the size of the challenge we face in Australia.

¹ BITRE, 2022, [Australian aggregate freight forecasts – 2022 update](#).

IRU truck driver shortage survey outcome: Australia

Q: How much difficulty are you having to fill driver positions due to the shortage of drivers?						
Driver shortage difficulties Company size (# employees)	Very severe difficulties	Severe difficulties	Moderate difficulties	Minor difficulties	No difficulty	Severe or very severe difficulties
1-4	26%	16%	18%	8%	32%	42%
5-20	13%	35%	35%	13%	4%	48%
20-199	21%	29%	38%	7%	5%	50%
200+	40%	30%	30%	0%	0%	70%
TOTAL	23%	26%	30%	8%	13%	49%

Q: Compared to this year, how much difficulty do you expect to have next year in filling driver positions due to the shortage of drivers?			
Driver shortage difficulties next year Company size (# employees)	More difficulties	Same level of difficulties	Less difficulties
1-4	34%	47%	18%
5-20	48%	48%	4%
20-199	31%	62%	7%
200+	60%	30%	10%
TOTAL	38%	51%	11%

2024 (average and by company size in # of employees)					
	Weighted average	1-4	5-20	20-199	200+
Driver shortage (unfilled positions)	13%	17%	16%	11%	7%
Women drivers	6.5%	8%	6%	5%	12%
Young drivers < 25 Y	5.2%	6%	1%	6%	8%
Old drivers > 55 Y	47%	55%	42%	45%	46%
Average age	49	49	48	51	46
Foreigners	10%	3%	13%	11%	14%
2024 unfilled truck driver positions: 26,049					

Our proposed National Road Freight Workforce Action Plan

Addressing this economic crisis requires multiple reforms from multiple governments. Co-ordinated action and leadership from National Cabinet is imperative. NatRoad proposes a National Road Freight Workforce Action Plan with eight key elements:

1. Create a national truck driver standard

Safer drivers result in safer roads, and better recognition of skills is important for improving industry image and attraction.

Clear and concise information is vital. Industry, employers, employees and aspiring drivers need clarity about best practice to inform training and hiring decisions.

Australia has a collection of imprecise pathways for drivers. Some courses lack quality, and there is limited availability of the apprenticeship. More Registered Training Operators (RTO's) are required with national quality standards in place.

We need a National Truck Driver Standard – a clear, nationally-consistent and competency-based standard that represents best practice for training truck drivers. There should be multiple pathways to achieving the standard, including the apprenticeship, the certificate III in driving operations, quality industry-based programs and competency-based pathways.

2. Implement the national truck driver apprenticeship

The apprenticeship was announced with great fanfare, but delivery has fallen significantly short. National Cabinet must show leadership and drive the adoption and delivery of the apprenticeship throughout the states and territories. As part of the Action Plan, each jurisdiction should commit to driving the adoption, delivery and promotion of the apprenticeship with clear resourcing and national consistency.

3. Create a national heavy vehicle skills hub

There is a clear information gap about career pathways into the road freight industry, and advice for both employers and prospective employees about training opportunities and support.

Governments have sought to address similar issues in rail by developing a National Rail Skills Hub. Funded by governments, the hub works closely with industry partners.² In particular, it includes information about a range of career pathways into the rail industry.

The proposed National Heavy Vehicle Skills Hub is an opportunity to improve access to quality information about the apprenticeship and other training opportunities and incentives.

4. Introduce training incentives

The NatRoad IRU truck driver shortage survey shows that larger freight businesses have had limited success in improving the diversity of the workforce, which is critical to addressing skills shortages.

² [National Rail Skills Hub](#).

The largest businesses (200+ employees) report a driver workforce with women making up 12 percent (compared to an industry average of 6.5 percent) and 8 percent of drivers aged under 25 (compared to an industry average of 5.2 percent). The ability of larger businesses to run recruitment, training and diversity programs is having an impact by increasing workforce diversity, although it should be noted that 70 percent of these businesses still face severe or very severe shortages.

Small businesses do not have the same access to training, and all businesses operate on tight profit margins. Introduction of improved training incentives would better enable industry to support new employee training.

5. Reform licensing and training

Time-based licensing needs reform. Just because a driver has held a license for a set period doesn't mean they're capable of handling the complexities of a large truck on Australian roads. The industry needs to move towards a competency-based approach, where drivers are tested on their ability to handle a vehicle in different conditions, not just how long they've held their license. The process needs to ensure that drivers are gaining the right experience before moving up to larger vehicles.

Austroads review of the National Heavy Vehicle Driver Competency Framework reported shortcomings with the current competency standards and training and assessment pathways:

- Drivers are not sufficiently skilled for employment when they are first licensed
- Coroners' inquests have identified deficiencies in the skills of some truck drivers
- Significant variation in the length of training and assessment programs, including some very short courses.

Additionally, not all states and territories require drivers to complete training.³

Licensing in all jurisdictions should require nationally based training that focuses on practical outcomes to obtain a license. This should also apply to overseas drivers, who need to undertake Australian training to ensure they understand our vehicles, road network, and related rules. Training is essential for a safer and efficient industry.

The delivery of nationally consistent reforms to licensing and training requires leadership from National Cabinet.

6. Deliver key actions in the ISA Workforce Plan

The Industry Skills Australia (ISA) 2024 Workforce Plan for Transport and Logistics represents one element of the overall action plan required. We need a National Cabinet Action Plan, which includes, but is not limited to, the ISA Workforce Plan.

There are several urgent priorities not addressed or delivered by the ISA 2024 Workforce Plan for Transport and Logistics because these priorities remain the responsibility of governments and other agencies. This has led to a disconnect between acknowledging the issues that industry is facing and the necessary commitment to delivery and resources from governments to address the immediate challenges.

³ Austroads, [Fact sheet 1: Improving safety with expanded competencies and training minimums](#).

As ISA moves towards their 2025 workforce plan, key actions and potential projects that directly address the urgent driver shortage should be prioritised and accelerated. Any additional resources that ISA recommends should be delivered. This includes: work to improve transport and logistics industry career information (which should in turn be incorporated into the proposed National Heavy Vehicle Skills Hub), scoping training to assist the integration of overseas drivers, support for improvements to licensing, identification of the core skills for “job-ready” drivers, and upskilling for high productivity vehicle drivers. Additionally, the shortage of trainers must also be addressed.

7. Recognise driver skill levels

The Australian Bureau of Statistics proposal to establish a new skill classification for articulated truck drivers at skill level 3 (as part of the ANZSCO skill levels) and redesignate tanker truck driver as a skill level 3 should both be adopted. This is critical to ensure recognition of professional drivers and ensure the right skill level classifications. ANZSCO classifications are important for integrating with other government policy decisions, including funding.

8. Address other road freight industry skills shortages

Skills shortages are also being experienced in non-driving roles in the road freight industry workforce, such as mechanics. Addressing these shortages should be included under the proposed National Cabinet Road Freight Workforce Action Plan and in the proposed National Heavy Vehicle Skills Hub.

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About NatRoad

The National Road Transport Association (NatRoad) is Australia’s largest national representative road freight transport operators’ association. NatRoad represents road freight operators, from owner-drivers to large fleet operators, general freight, road trains, livestock, tippers, express, car carriers, as well as tankers and refrigerated operators.