

Synthesis report on research undertaken to inform the New Entrants as Sewing Machinists Project

Overview

The New Entrants as Sewing Machinists Project, commissioned by TextileWorks and supported by Skills Insight, is examining how Australia can establish a more reliable and sustainable pathway for new entrants into industrial sewing work. The project responds to evidence that Australia's Sewing Machinist workforce is relatively small, ageing and difficult to replenish, while employers across a range of manufacturing sectors, including furnishing and automotive and marine trimming, continue to require workers with industrial sewing skills.

Three related reports have been developed through the project:

- **Demand and Supply of Sewing Machinists in Australia** – examining the size and characteristics of the workforce, employer demand, sources of labour supply, vocational education and training (VET) provision and the capacity of existing supply mechanisms to replenish the workforce.
- **Review of Training Programs and Initiatives for Entry-Level Sewing Machinists** – reviewing 56 Australian and international programs and initiatives to identify best practice approaches to attracting, training and transitioning new entrants into industrial sewing work.
- **Building Australia's Next Sewing Machinist Workforce: A discussion paper on a nationally coordinated pathway into industrial sewing work** – drawing together the findings of the two research reports and proposing a framework for a nationally coordinated but locally delivered entry-level pathway for consideration and co-design with employers, unions and other stakeholders.

The Building Australia's Next Sewing Machinist Workforce discussion paper is not a final program design. It provides the foundation for the next stage of the project, which will involve co-designing a model for an entry-level Sewing Machinist pathway with workers, employers, unions, Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), social enterprises, community organisations, governments and other stakeholders. This work will focus on identifying and documenting the features of an effective pathway into the occupation, rather than developing training products or qualifications.

Taken together, the three reports provide an evidence base for action. The demand-and-supply analysis establishes the workforce case for intervention; the review of Australian and international programs identifies the design principles most likely to deliver sustainable

employment outcomes; and the discussion paper translates this evidence into a proposed nationally coordinated pathway for testing and refinement through co-design.

The workforce challenge

The *Demand and Supply of Sewing Machinists in Australia* report identifies industrial sewing as an important capability used across apparel and garment manufacturing, textile products, canvas and awnings, leather goods, repairs and alterations, furnishing and upholstery, and selected automotive, marine and technical-textile applications.

Although estimates vary according to occupational classification and reference period, the evidence consistently points to a small workforce with an older-than-average age profile. The current OSCA profile reports 8,600 Sewing Machinists, while the historical ANZSCO profile reports 6,500. These figures should not be interpreted as workforce growth because they are based on different classifications, datasets and reference periods (Jobs and Skills Australia 2026a; Jobs and Skills Australia 2026b). More important is the age structure. Only 5.6 per cent of Sewing Machinists were aged 15-24 in the 2021 Census-based OSCA data, while more than 40 per cent were aged 55 years or older (Jobs and Skills Australia 2026a).

This makes replacement demand a major workforce issue. As experienced machinists leave the workforce, businesses risk losing not only skilled labour but also specialist knowledge of machinery, materials, production methods, product requirements and quality standards.

The workforce challenge cannot be understood solely through the long-term contraction of clothing manufacturing. Industrial sewing skills are required across a broader range of manufacturing and service sectors. Demand-and-supply research shows that employers continue to advertise for Sewing Machinists and that vacancy activity has increased sharply since around 2020. Even modest recruitment requirements can create difficulties for individual businesses because the total occupational workforce is small and employers may require workers experienced with particular machinery, materials, products and production processes. The issue is therefore not necessarily about rebuilding the Sewing Machinist workforce to its historic size, but about establishing a mechanism capable of continually replenishing a smaller yet strategically important industrial-sewing workforce.

The report notes that existing sources of supply are insufficient to provide a dependable replacement pipeline. Workers may enter from related occupations or bring informal or overseas sewing experience, but industrial sewing skills are not automatically transferable between apparel, leather, canvas, upholstery, automotive and marine applications. Bridging training and supervised workplace practice may be required.

Skilled migration is also a very constrained source of supply. Sewing Machinist is not included in the Core Skills Occupation List, and the industry has very limited access to mainstream skilled-migration pathways.

The direct VET pipeline is similarly small and fragmented. The MSTSS00015 Industrial Sewing Skill Set recorded approximately 275 enrolments nationally between 2021 and 2025, with delivery heavily concentrated in South Australia. While the MST20722 Certificate II in Apparel, Fashion and Textiles has substantially more enrolments, it is a broad qualification covering multiple occupational streams and cannot be treated as a direct measure of Sewing Machinist supply.

The demand-and-supply analysis therefore concludes that the central challenge is broader than increasing training numbers. Australia needs to strengthen the entire workforce lifecycle: attraction, accessible foundational sewing skills training, workplace induction, retention, specialist development, supervision and mentoring, progression, and the transfer of knowledge from experienced workers.

What effective entry-level pathways look like

The *Review of Training Programs and Initiatives for Entry-Level Sewing Machinists* provides the second part of the evidence base. It examines 56 programs and initiatives, 27 Australian and 29 international programs, to identify best practice approaches that can inform an employer-driven, nationally applicable training model.

A central finding is that the most effective approaches, both in Australia and internationally, are integrated workforce pathways rather than stand-alone industrial sewing courses. Effective programs link attraction and recruitment, practical industrial training, realistic production experience, employer involvement, workplace learning, and transition into paid employment or further training.

The review identifies a common industrial sewing foundation skill set as important because the underlying capability is transferable across sectors. Entry-level training should develop safe operation and basic maintenance of industrial sewing machinery, materials handling, production methods, quality requirements, workplace health and safety, and communication and problem-solving, before learners move into sector-specific applications.

Training also needs to replicate the realities of industrial production. Learners require experience on industrial machinery and exposure to production pace, quality standards, workflow, teamwork and different materials. Live production, customer orders, factory visits, structured placements and realistic production environments provide a bridge between learning how to sew and becoming productive in a commercial workplace.

The review also highlights the importance of direct involvement by employers and unions. Employers should help identify workforce demand and vacancies, contribute to program design, provide workplace exposure and placements, and where possible offer interviews, employment, apprenticeships or other earn-and-learn opportunities.

At the same time, employers, particularly SMEs, need assistance to take on inexperienced workers. Supervisor and mentor development, onboarding resources, shared training facilities, coordinated recruitment, equipment access and appropriate funding can strengthen employers' capacity to recruit, train and retain new entrants.

Learner support is equally important. Potential entrants include school leavers and career changers as well as jobseekers, migrants, refugees, people with informal sewing experience and others facing barriers to participation. Effective programs incorporate culturally safe wraparound assistance such as language, literacy and numeracy support, mentoring, transport and caring assistance, settlement support and workplace orientation.

Overall, the review supports a tiered and connected pathway incorporating engagement and tasters, short industrial-sewing training, structured work exposure, transition into paid

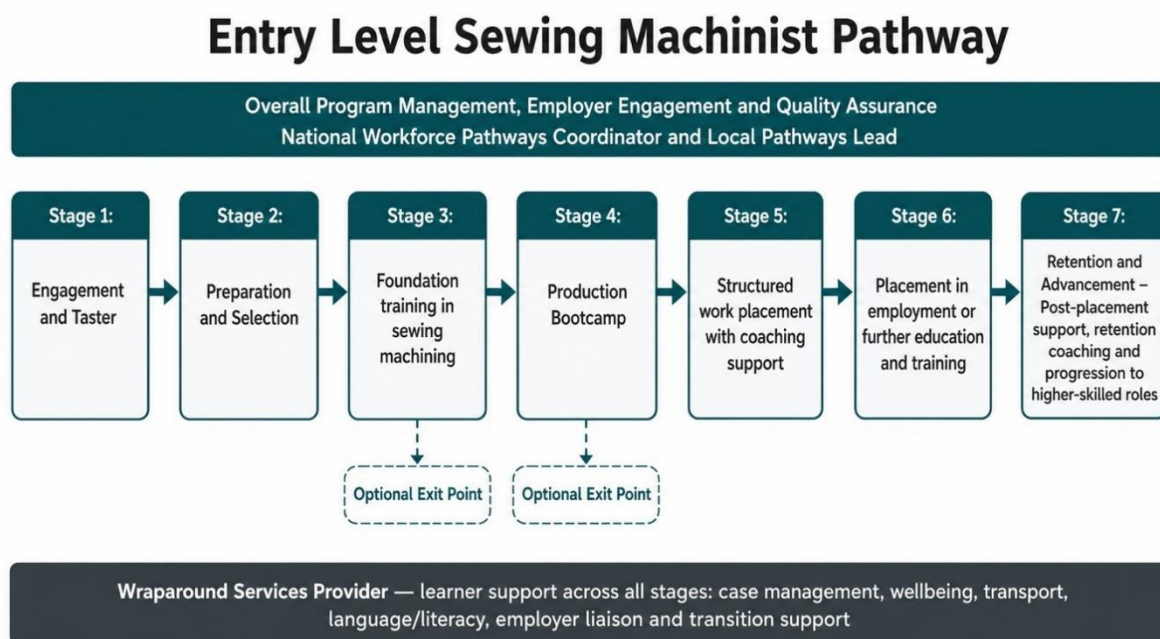
employment, progression into higher-level or sector-specific training, and continuing mentoring, retention and career-development support.

Proposed national pathway

Drawing on these two research reports, Building Australia’s Next Sewing Machinist Workforce proposes a National Entry-Level Sewing Machinist Workforce Development Initiative.

The central proposition is that a nationally coordinated but locally delivered initiative could establish a more reliable pathway into industrial sewing by linking employer demand with nationally recognised training, production practice, Workplace support, learner support and sustained employment outcomes.

The proposed model combines a common national framework with local flexibility. Its central component is an entry-level pathway for sewing machinists, connecting job and career information, nationally recognised foundation sewing machining training, production practice, structured work placements, and a supported transition into employment or further education and training. The suggested entry-level pathway, which is summarised in the following diagram, recognises the importance of meaningful employer and union engagement, structured workplace learning, wraparound learner support, and a focus on employment, retention, and employer satisfaction rather than on enrolments and completions alone.



National coordination would provide the common architecture needed to turn individual training and employment initiatives into a coherent workforce pathway. This would include common quality and workplace-learning standards, shared pathway and employer-engagement resources, coordinated evaluation and dissemination of lessons across pilot sites. Local partnerships would retain flexibility to adapt delivery to employer demand, industry mix, available RTO and equipment capacity, learner groups and support needs.

It is proposed that the final version of the entry-level pathways for sewing machinists be tested through local pilots designed to meet diverse industry requirements, including apparel and uniforms, textile products, leather, canvas, furnishing and upholstery, and automotive and marine trimming. The pilot selection process will take into account demonstrated demand for sewing machinists' skills, industry concentration, employer and union commitment, RTO capacity, learner supply, support services and local partnership readiness.

An important complementary component of this workforce development initiative is the Workplace Coach and Supervisor Pathway. This recognises that experienced Sewing Machinists have an important role in Workplace support and transferring technical and production knowledge to new entrants. Social enterprises may also contribute through learner engagement, introductory training, production experience, transitional employment and wraparound support, depending on local circumstances.

Next stage - co-designing the entry-level pathway

The three reports collectively establish the rationale and evidence base for moving from research into co-design.

The next stage of the New Entrants as Sewing Machinists Project will engage workers, employers, unions, RTOs, industry bodies, social enterprises, community organisations, governments and other stakeholders to refine and test the proposed entry-level pathway.

The co-design process will consider the structure and duration of the pathway; the mix of tasters, foundation training, production practice and workplace learning; appropriate nationally recognised training products; specialist industry streams; employer commitments; the role and development of Workplace Coaches; learner and wraparound support; governance and funding arrangements; pilot locations; and measures of employment, retention and progression.

It will also determine what should be nationally consistent and what should remain locally adaptable and develop an implementation plan that can be tested through pilot delivery.

The intended outcome is not simply another training program. It is a co-designed national workforce pathway that connects attraction and recruitment with industrial training, workplace capability building, supported transition into employment and longer-term workforce renewal. The proposed next step is to test the framework with stakeholders, confirm employer requirements, refine the learner and Workplace Coach pathways, identify suitable pilot sites, assess governance arrangements, confirm employer commitment and use the results to inform the final model and an implementation plan.

It is envisaged that the co-developed model, which has been tested and validated nationally with industry, will be submitted to Skills Insight and the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations by April 2027.

Source documents:

Demand and Supply of Sewing Machinists in Australia

Review of Training Programs and Initiatives for Entry-Level Sewing Machinists

Building Australia's Next Sewing Machinist Workforce: A discussion paper on a nationally coordinated pathway into industrial sewing work.

References:

Jobs and Skills Australia 2026a, Sewing Machinist (OSCA 731431), Australian Government, viewed 29 September 2026, <<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/occupations-osca/731431-sewing-machinist>>.

Jobs and Skills Australia 2026b, Sewing Machinists (ANZSCO 7116), Australian Government, viewed 29 September 2026, <<https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/occupations-anzsco/7116-sewing-machinists>>.



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