

HVAC&R Nation

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Locked up!

Boxes, cages
and crimes
against condensers

Skills

WORKSHOP

Commissioning
hydronic
systems

LICENSED TO CHILL

Are trade qualifications
working for fridgies?

LICENSED TO CHILL



Thirty years ago – as crazy as it seems – there were no restrictions on who could work on refrigeration and air conditioning systems. Despite all the efforts made since then, we may have gone full circle with poorly trained technicians taking on the work of those more qualified. **Sean McGowan** reports.

For decades, many have argued that the Australian HVAC&R industry has suffered due to a lack of an occupational licence.

It has resulted in refrigeration and air conditioning technicians competing with plumbers and electricians for the same work, and it has shown up the complicated differences in licensing between states.

More recently, it has also aggravated Certificate III-qualified professionals who have watched on as less qualified Certificate II holders perform unlicensed work unchecked.

The introduction of these two qualifications supported the establishment of an environmental licence scheme, and in 2005 the government appointed the Australian Refrigeration Council (ARC) to administer the scheme.

Certificate II qualifications were originally established to ensure only qualified tradespeople could install split system air conditioning systems and heat pumps – helping to fill a vital skills gap identified in the HVAC&R industry at the time.

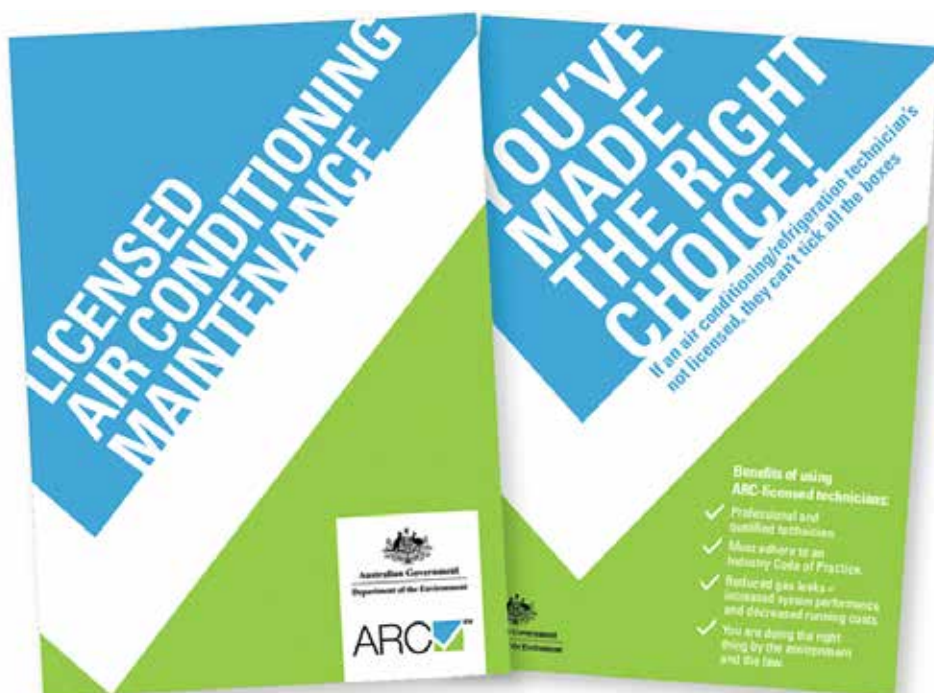
According to the ARC, someone who obtains the relevant Certificate II-level qualification is eligible to obtain a restricted heat pump – split systems – installation and decommissioning licence.

This licence entitles a person to handle refrigerant for the installation and decommissioning of any of the following:

- A single-head split system air conditioner of less than 18kW
- A two-part hot water heat pump of less than 18kW
- A two-part swimming pool heat pump of less than 18kW.

Certificate III qualifications are significantly more rigorous and represent the trade qualification for refrigeration and air conditioning (RAC). This is a four-year apprenticeship, and the length of the course reflects the complexity of the systems.

“A person who obtains the relevant Certificate III-level qualification is eligible to obtain a full refrigeration and air conditioning licence,” says the ARC. “This licence entitles a person to handle refrigerant for any work in the refrigeration and air conditioning industry, excluding automotive and various other specialist areas.”



The ARC administers licensing for refrigerant handling, but does not have the power to prosecute unlicensed work.



ARMA Queensland executive officer Lindsay Jahnke



RACCA president Kevin O'Shea

But somewhere along the line, Certificate II qualified technicians began to work on refrigeration and air conditioning systems outside their scope of qualification. And it seems they have been left – with little threat of punishment – to grow in number, to the detriment of fully licensed and qualified RAC professionals.

According to the ARC, it is notified from time to time of suspected cases of licence holders working outside the scope of their licence.

“For issues relating to non-compliant activity, ARC’s role is to investigate and educate,” it says. “Cases of continued non-compliance are referred to the Department of the Environment and Energy who are responsible for enforcement.”

AN INDUSTRY VIEW

It’s fair to say that many in the RAC industry believe the current qualifications and licensing arrangements are failing them.

According to Lindsay Jahnke, owner of Western Downs Refrigeration and the Queensland executive officer for ARMA (Australian Refrigeration Mechanics Association), the current requirements for Certificate II qualifications are not sufficient.

“Certificate II is mostly RPL (recognition of prior learning) as a peripheral trade for electricians and/or plumbers,” says Jahnke.

Although the course was originally intended to be taken across an 11-week period under the supervision of a fully qualified RAC technician, the path to Certificate II qualification has become considerably more basic and shorter. In fact, some registered training organisations reportedly offer the course in as little as two days.

Jahnke says because of recognition of prior learning, electricians and plumbers are only required to complete two units of competency to attain a Certificate II qualification.

“It is not sufficient from a safety perspective or from an energy efficiency one either,” he says.

This view is shared by Kevin O’Shea, managing director of Cold Rae Air Conditioning and Refrigeration, and current president of RACCA (Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Contractors’ Association) Australia.

He says that the Certificate II qualification was originally intended to be an assessment tool to assess the competencies of people who were already working in our industry without formal qualifications.

“

I am now of the opinion that the Certificate II has exceeded its usefulness – Kevin O’Shea

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“However, some training providers saw this as an opportunity to make money by giving qualification to people not already working within our industry, and who had not achieved the skills and knowledge required to work on split systems,” he says.

“I am now of the opinion that the Certificate II has exceeded its usefulness and should cease to be delivered.”

Having recently travelled across Australia for the Future:Gas roadshow, O’Shea says that the Certificate II is high on the list of concerns among RAC professionals.

“I made a point of asking them, ‘If all Certificate II technicians had completed the 300-plus hours of training, would they then have an issue?’ None of them had a problem with this, so long as the correct training was delivered.”

COMPETING FOR WORK

Some Certificate II qualified technicians have even reportedly moved beyond split system and heat pump installations, to more technical refrigeration work requiring Certificate III qualifications.

Energy efficiency, safe work practices, excessive energy costs and refrigerant leaks are among the many risks of unqualified tradespeople carrying out unlicensed work in the RAC space.

According to Ryan Ardill who owns and operates his own business in South Australia, Ryan Ardill Air Conditioning, there are hundreds of examples – some documented – of Certificate II qualified technicians carrying out unlicensed work. These include refrigeration cool room work, servicing, fault diagnosis and unlicensed work carried out on compressors.



Many lament the loss of the master and apprentice training method.



Despite the desire for better training and stricter trade qualifications, more and more apprentices are working on a limited range of equipment.

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Lack of policing has seen Certificate II technicians working on cold rooms, blood fridges at hospitals, supermarkets – basically anything to do with refrigeration – Lindsay Jahnke

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“They have no consequences for advertising and carrying out unlicensed work,” he says.

“To my knowledge, there has been no prosecution or fine of anyone in Australia releasing refrigerant or carrying out unlicensed work ... they continue to be able to do this as there is no mechanism to stop them.”

Jahnke tells a similar story.

As well as the technical issues associated with unlicensed work going unchecked, he says the livelihood of fully qualified RAC professionals and their businesses is affected.

“Certificate II holders have predominantly taken over the split system air conditioning installations – the stepping stone for a new refrigeration business to grow in this industry,” he says.

“Unfortunately, the lack of policing has seen Certificate II technicians working on cold rooms,

blood fridges at hospitals, supermarkets – basically anything to do with refrigeration.”

And Jahnke says fully qualified RAC professionals are also being squeezed by plumbers.

“Plumbers are taking over the commercial work and we, the trade qualified, are only hired to do the commissioning,” he says. “I have heard of plumbers using water to leak test a new installation, which is one of the worst things you can do.”

NO EASY FIX

Despite the calls for change – and a consensus among industry bodies that something must be done – there is no easy fix.

According to Jahnke, appropriate regulation of the trade throughout Australia – and the introduction of an occupational licence for all refrigeration and air conditioning work (requiring Certificate III qualifications) – is vital if such problems are to be solved.

He also thinks public awareness of the refrigeration and air conditioning trade is lacking, and this contributes to the problems.

“There is limited recognition of Certificate III RAC being the trade qualified to carry out all HVAC&R works, and consumers are confused – they think it’s an electrician or plumber’s job, depending on the state you live in.”

Others like Ardill would like to see a new industry body established to create a better system.

“A new system must be given the power to inspect work carried out by Certificate II holders,” he says. “If it’s not up to standard, then they should be required by law to employ someone to carry out the necessary work to rectify the issue.”

O’Shea, who has lobbied for the abolishment of Certificate II qualifications for some time, thinks it is now too late for such a move to be successful.

“Could we revert to the Certificate III only? Unfortunately, I believe the horse has bolted and there would not be enough Certificate III qualified technicians to handle all of the work. But it would be good to upskill Certificate II workers to an acceptable level.”

Recently, the ARC RAC industry board conducted a review of Certificate II training and its alignment with the restricted split system licence.

The review found a number of areas relating to shortfalls in competencies, which ARC says can be expected of qualifications that are over 10 years old. It also recognised the need to “tighten up” the evidence required by trainers as part of determining competency.

The ARC RAC industry board has provided this report to the Department of the Environment and Energy, who control what qualifications align with each licence.

We will watch this space with interest.

Editor’s note

Issues of sub-standard training quality are investigated by the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). ARC assists ASQA with some of these investigations and has provided case studies on the Certificate II and III training modules to ASQA to support their initiatives. ■

For more information on the ARC’s refrigerant handling licences, go to www.arctick.org